Environmental scientist champions native grasses

By BETSY FRIAUF
Special Contributor

A struggle against prejudice is playing out in Texas' wild places — and in city and suburban landscapes, too. Native Texas grasses get no respect, but environmental scientist Rich Jaynes intends to change that.

Bluestem, switchgrass, meadow cress, and sedoats — Texas' official state grass — are all beautiful to Jaynes, a range-management expert. He admits, however, to facing an uphill battle: “Most people think they're weeds.”

As with most prejudices, this one, Jaynes believes, is rooted in ignorance. Many people don't know the difference between the monocultures that invade disturbed soil and the native grasses that once sustained all manner of wildlife, which, in turn, sustained people.

To illustrate, Jaynes looks back into Texas history. Three-quarters of what's now the Lone Star State was once grassland and savanna, according to the Native Prairies Association of Texas. Settlers, who saw the virgin prairie as the basis of a cash crop, busted the native grass and set about planting cotton.

They grazed cattle after the major nutrients were stripped out.

Now, less than 1 percent of Texas' original 20 million acres of tall-grass prairie remains.

Still, today, “Grasses are the most important life form to humans,” Jaynes says. “All our grain crops come from them. They keep our soil from blowing away or washing away. They're in more environments than any other living thing.”

His quest is to preserve as much of the prairie as possible, and he is glad to see native grasses being used in landscapes. They are popular with landscape designers and architects because they are extremely tolerant of drought.

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Bluestem was transplanted to Connemara Conservancy.
Jaynes advocates, preserves native grasses

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Rich Jaynes

The fall-blooming wildflower goldenrod (center) inhabits the same North Texas prairie as side-oats grama (left), the state grass of Texas, and switchgrass. All can be used in residential landscapes.

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The perennials need little maintenance, except an annual cut in spring, and they provide four seasons of interest in the garden.

Jaynes creates master plans for nature preserves and prepares environmental impact statements for major infrastructure projects such as highway construction and wind-farm routing. He catalogs the vegetation that will be displaced, and in some cases physically transplants it to a safe location.

and Gunter. Public prairies, such as Parchill Prairie northeast of McKinney, also are good hunting grounds.

Jaynes forges to make bundles of dried grasses for visual aids at his presentations. He recently conducted a native-grasses identification workshop for the Garland Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas.

Organizations such as NPSSOT also are good sources of native grasses; members trade plants and seeds among themselves.
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Rich Jaynes

Rich Jaynes’ arrangement of 15 native grasses earned an award at an event sponsored by the Native Plant Society of Texas. Jaynes scours North Texas for seeds and has established plots of native grasses at Connemara Conservancy.

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To make his demonstration bundles, Jaynes dries grasses in his garage. They make attractive arrangements when grouped in an appropriate container. He fashioned an arrangement of 15 native grasses that earned an honorable mention at October’s statewide NPSOT meeting in Denton.

Jaynes’ own yard in Plano blooms brightly with a long season of lantana but otherwise is traditional, he says. With acres and acres of prairie to guard and nurture, he feels no compulsion to re-create a miniature prairie on his home turf.

Betsy Priyauf is a freelance writer in Plano.

garden@dallasnews.com

Resources

Connemara Conservancy: connemaraconservancy.org
Native Plant Society of Texas: npso.t.org
Native Prairies Association of Texas: texasprairie.org

Native American Seed: seedsource.com