

Go Native



Bill and Jan Neiman

The owners of Texas' Native American Seed are on a mission: to help restore the land.

“Each seed knows how to live right here without any help or extra care. Native plants don’t have to be watered, fertilized or sprayed.” — Bill Neiman

Earlier this warm August day, light rains showered River Run Ranch, a 254-acre spread that hugs a mile of the Llano River near Junction, Texas. Although the moisture brought welcome relief and cooler temperatures, the drought-stricken land where Bill and Jan Neiman farm desperately needs more rain.

It’s nearly noon, and Jan has prepared a lunch of venison sandwiches, home-grown tomatoes and sliced cantaloupe. Seated at their dining room table, Bill gazes out nearby windows, which overlook their front yard and beyond, to a field of native grasses and flowers stretching across a valley below the house.

“See that grass?” asks Bill, pausing between bites to point at tufts of green blades waving in the yard. “That’s sideoats grama, and it’s never been watered.” Then he nods toward distant rows of big bluestem grass, growing in thick clumps. “Neither has that field out there.”

From Bill’s perspective, the solution to ongoing droughts and environmental problems lies within the simplicity of a seed.

Why Native?

“We’ve got to take the information that’s stored inside native seeds and multiply it in the land,” he says earnestly. “Each seed knows how to live right here without any help or extra care. Native plants don’t have to be watered, fertilized or sprayed. We don’t have to use our resources to take care of native vegetation. Did you know that at least 70 percent of our clean drinking water goes on residential landscapes?”

That statistic and others concerning the earth’s shrinking natural resources concern the Neimans deeply. That’s why growing and nurturing native vegetation has become a lifestyle as well as a business for the couple, who established Native American Seed in 1989.

Through their company, they produce, harvest and sell the seeds of wildflowers and prairie grasses that are native to Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Louisiana. More than 180 species are available via their biannual catalog and informative Web site. These include buffalograss, Indiangrass, little bluestem, black-eyed Susan, gayfeather, purple cornflower and scarlet sage.

The Neimans also offer habitat restoration and consulting services under their parent company, Neiman Environments, Inc.

Bill started his first company, Neiman Environments Landscape Construction Co., at the age of 19.

“In 1974, I borrowed a shovel, rake and lawn mower from a friend who had a garbage business,” he recalls. “I advertised in his monthly garbage bills that I would do ‘total outdoor care.’ People responded to what I was doing.”

Within six years, the business was handling large-scale commercial projects.



Sideoats grama

From 1979 to 1990, he also operated Neiman’s Native Plant Nursery in Flower Mound, one of the first outlets for native plants in north-central Texas.

In 1978, Bill met Jan, an organic gardener, when she hired him to bring her a



A hummingbird samples standing cypress blossoms.



Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

The Native American Seed warehouse

load of dirt. The couple married in 1981. Four years later, they began hand-collecting native seeds and saving them in mason jars in their washroom.

Restoring Land for IBM

“We became known as native plant pioneers who were heading in this direction 20 years ago,” Bill says. “That’s how Bill Ross, the vice president of real estate acquisition at IBM, knew about me in the mid ’80s. IBM owned 1,600 acres at The Colony in north-central Texas and wanted to restore it as Blackland prairie. Bill Ross wanted to set a model for corporate America on how to manage corporate land

127 acres along the Llano River near Junction in 1995.

From Native Plants to Native Seed

“We both liked the idea of harvesting and selling native seeds,” Jan explains. “We discovered that the back of a pickup can hold enough plants to landscape a yard. But the same truck can hold enough seeds to restore 100 acres. So it was a natural jump to move from native plants to native seeds. Plus, we could have our business in a remote area like Junction. Argyle was rural and beautiful, but the destruction was getting worse. Bulldozers were knocking down

banks. So he hired us to restore it.”

Meanwhile, as the couple’s dual interest in producing native seed grew, so did their family. With the arrival of Emily, now 23, and Weston, now 17, the Neimans decided to leave their 10-acre homestead in Argyle, located north of Fort Worth. After searching for 10 years, they bought

post oaks every day. We tried to stop it by proposing ordinances and hosting festivals to increase awareness, but we finally gave up. You have to choose your battles.”

“We knew we were in the wrong area for what we were doing,” Bill adds. “We knew we needed a clean source of water and good farmland, plus a good school for our children. This place met all those needs.”

The acreage was half of a ranch called River Run, originally owned by a pair of brothers. Five years later, the Neimans obtained a loan with Capital Farm Credit in Mason to purchase an additional 103 acres of River Run. Two more loans bought farm equipment and the remaining 23 acres of River Run.



Bill Neiman

Indiangrass



Benefits of a Native Landscape

- **Saves water.** Once established, native plants don’t need watering.
- **Saves time and effort.** Native plants require little or no maintenance.
- **Saves money.** You don’t have to fertilize or spray. Because native plants belong in your landscape, they are naturally disease- and bug-resistant.
- **Saves wildlife.** Native plants serve as food and habitat for native birds and animals.

“Farm Credit has been very pleasant and easy to work with,” Bill says. “I wasn’t comfortable with banks in the past. Our previous lender of 18 years changed its name five times, then failed. Plus, our business profile isn’t standard, but the folks at Capital Farm Credit are very receptive to the direction of our business and accommodating to our needs. Our last loan allowed us to expand our farming, and it just made sense to put the original ranch back together. What we’re doing is subdivision in reverse.”

Bill Lehmborg, vice president of Capital Farm Credit in Mason, admires the Neimans and the work they do.

“They utilize everything, and they have a plan for everything,” he says. “They’re very passionate about what they do. They not only produce native seeds for the region, but they also want people to know the best ways to utilize their products, and one way they do that is through their Web site.

“They practice what they preach,” he adds. “Their business has done well, so they’re doing something right!”

Harvesting Seed on Private Lands

In fact, the Neimans are doing so well that they now employ 15 people. They also own five combines, two 18-wheelers, plenty of

other farm machinery and a full-scale seed-cleaning machine. In addition to planting and harvesting seed on their own land, Native American Seed harvests from private lands across the state. Bill, who has his pilot’s license, has two high-wing aircrafts for aerial surveying.

“We find harvest sites on other ranches and prairie remnants,” he explains. “That’s part of our business — to know where they are. We bring in thousands of pounds of flower and grass seed. Our best year was 2000, when we harvested 27,000 pounds of seed from a southeast Texas coastal prairie.”

As for the couple’s other company, Neiman Environments offers habitat restoration and consulting services. Their many clients include IBM, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Tech University, and Meadowbrook Farms Golf Course near Houston. Currently, the Neimans are restoring riverbanks near the King William Historic District in San Antonio for the Corps of Engineers.

“We don’t get involved in a project unless it has an educational component,” Bill says.

Bill Neiman



Cool River Cabin

“The San Antonio project is highly visible and has exposure to the public.”

Expansion Plans Include Ecotourism

Future plans at River Run Ranch include expanding more into ecotourism. The Neimans already rent out Cool River Cabin, a two-bedroom cabin located a short stroll away from the Llano River.

Meanwhile, up at the house, gray skies still linger outside the window as Bill and Jan finish lunch. At his seat, Bill opines on one of his favorite terms: bioregional.

“That’s something Native Americans who came before us had,” he says. “They knew how to be native to a place. It’s hard to become native to your land when you’re rolling over concrete all day long. It boils down to getting people out of their box and touching the earth. Most of us look at our lawns and expect them to be immaculate, uniform and of one species, when in nature that’s not how it works. So, Native American Seed began to offer a mixture of short grasses to encourage a new paradigm of rebuilding the land.

“We are trying to help people restore the earth,” concludes Bill before he heads back to the fields with Jan. “We see ourselves as putting fresh options on the table and giving people the chance to see live results. Planting native seeds is the first step.” ■ SSR

To request a catalog, go to www.seedsource.com or call (800) 728-4043.

Bill Neiman



A butterfly drinks nectar from the lavender blooms of this native, known as the obedient plant.