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RANCH & RURAL LIVING

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Native Grass Seeds Can Restore Rangelands

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Olive's Nursery

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COVER: Founder of Native American Seed, Bill Neiman, is surrounded by a diversity of native seeds harvested from an unplowed prairie remnant. These seeds are useful in land and wildlife restoration, sustainable grazing and prairie conservation. Photo by Callie Richmond. See story, page 8.

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With the help of Native American Seed, the community of Junction, Texas, has created this amazing "Landscape of Hopes and Dreams," dedicated to Opal B. Roberts. Junction Middle School's rain garden is featured on the EPA Web site as a water-efficient model for the nationwide movement toward sustainable landscapes. Photo by Scott Richardson. Video of the garden may be viewed on Youtube.com.

Restoring Rangeland: Native American Seed

Can you imagine West Texas as a vast sea of native grasses and forbs supporting deer, antelope and thousands upon thousands of buffalo? All early accounts tell the same story. Texas rangelands were practically treeless, lush with growth and productive. Of course, to maintain their state, the prairies and deserts at the time were periodically swept clean with severe, naturally occurring fires. The huge buffalo herds came through seasonally and heavily grazed the prairie growth and trampled upon and churned up the prairie soils. All the natural elements of grassland production were in a kind of equilibrium. And the result was exceptional rangeland.

But with settlement came farming, fences, cattle, sheep, goats, overgrazing, fire control, spread of mesquite, surges in cedar growth, and intentional and unintentional introduction of non-native invasive species. Health of the native prairies and desert grasslands declined over the years of use.

Restoration of rangeland is recognized now as essential to our livestock production and ranching industry. Researchers and extension agents and personnel have thankfully turned their efforts and energies toward promoting such activity and toward helping individual ranchers and ranching families in caring for their range.

The founder of Native American Seed, Bill Neiman, and his family went into business 20 years ago supporting the effort to restore prairies and rangelands with native species. They're still around today and stronger than ever. Headquartered in Junction, Texas, they sell seeds they annually harvest from stands of native growth, both pristine prairie areas and cultivated farms of native stock.

Bill and wife Jan Neiman started their business in 1989 in the blackland prairie and cross timbers area of Texas.

The business of locating, harvesting and selling native wild-



Marshall, son of Joy and Darren Brown of Junction, stands proudly by Bushy Bluestem a native grass. He helped in creating the Junction Middle School landscape garden.

flower and grass seeds occurred to them not because of an ideology or as an abstract idea, but out of years of experience in landscape construction and in the nursery business. Bill had hydro-mulched, seeded, sodded and irrigated untold acres of Bermuda and St. Augustine grass in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex area. But he knew that native grasses and plants fit in better with the ecosystem and were more sustainable—and economical in the long run—because they required less water than the typical lawn grasses.

"It is time to redefine landscaping," Bill says. "Americans currently use on their urban lawns more natural resources than are used in the agricultural production of the entire continents of Africa and India combined."

In 1995 Bill and Jan moved the business to a place on the Llano River near Junction. There a team of dedicated staff working toward Native American Seed's mission of helping people restore rangelands and thus improve the health of the planet, sows and harvests native grasses, forbs and wildflowers. They take seed orders from all over, mostly via their Web site, according to daughter Emily, who maintains the site along with other company duties.

They source native seed from other locations as well. A big part of Bill Neiman's work still consists of scouting the landscape from

—CONTINUED ON PAGE 12—

Daisy, Foxglove, Gayfeather, Golden-Wave, Greenthread, Indian Blanket, Mealy Blue Sage, Missouri Primrose, Purple Prairie Clover, Texas Bluebonnet and Standing Cypress. Another is the Comanche Mix, matched to the climate and rainfall from the southwestern Hill Country to the Rolling Plains, containing Greenthread,

Huisache Daisy, Indian Blanket, Lazy Daisy, Prairie Verbena, Texas Bluebonnet and Lemon Mint.

The Western Rangeland Mix, Blackland Prairie Mix, Coastal Prairie Mix and Eastern Savannah Grass Mix each contain native seeds suitable for the area the names describe. The Web site at seedsources.com



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is worth a visit to view the various varieties and mixes the company offers.

Emily Neiman adds that what makes their company different from other seed companies is "our commitment to offering only those plants that are native to our bio-region. Native American Seed understands that every ecosystem is a delicate web of relationships that have evolved over centuries. And humans, with all their power of creativity and imagination, must respect the wisdom of those centuries before entering into the processes of nature as active participants.

"Native American Seed wants to provide alternatives for people who would actually like to DO something about their environment." ♦

PAID ADVERTISING

Ranchers' Source for Native Seeds

Native American Seed works to produce ecological conservancy harvests on Texas' last great prairies. This local approach plays a valuable role in preserving unique genetic richness and diversity in the seeds we offer. These seeds are useful in land and wildlife habitat restoration, sustainable grazing and prairie conservation.

Native American Seed is a family-owned business. It was born in a space we created out behind the barn on our little 7-acre patch of prairie remnant in Argyle, Texas. When our son Weston came along to join his sister Emily, it was clearly time to move our office out of the house.

We moved to the outskirts of the Texas Hill Country in the summer of 1995, where we found a beautiful place on the Llano River just outside the town of Junction and later converted a building in Junction to our office headquarters.

What makes us different from many other wildflower seed companies is our commitment to offering superior customer service, and only those plants that are native to our bioregion.

Shop online at our website to purchase native grass seed blends perfect for your region or climate in Texas. One example is our "Caliche Mix," containing grasses that do well in low moisture areas. This seed mix contains Blue Grama, Buffalograss, Green Sprangletop, Indiangrass, Little Bluestem, Prairie Wildrye, Sand Lovegrass, Sideoats Grama, Sand Dropseed, Texas Cupgrass, Cane Bluestem and Curly Mesquite. For more packages or individual plant species selections, visit www.seedsources.com.



Native Grass Seed

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...helping people restore the earth

*Pour yourself a cup o' coffee
and I'll tell ya a story . . .*

I guess you've figured by now, we are all in this together. Whether we farm or ranch, build or develop, design or construct, landscape or maintain, home-own or recreate on property . . . we are all, in effect . . . profoundly influencing the management of the land.

Our day-to-day decisions lead to our actions (or lack of action) . . . and slowly over time the accumulation of our work comes into view. But in order to view "the grass issue" . . . one must first realize a human lifespan is a wee bit short. To focus on the longterm changes of grassland health over 5 or 10 decades is a difficult task. In today's reality, it is pretty hard to know the land . . . especially when so much of one's time is spent rolling on concrete.

And that is why I want to share my story. I've been here in Texas goin' on 80 years now. Seen good times when a nickel in town would get me into the Saturday night picture show. Seen times out in West Texas when the pastures stretched out as far as the eye could venture. Seen times in East Texas when a man could raise a family on what a quarter section, 160 acres, could produce.

We used to drink the water straight off the creeks and there was always a place to camp or fish or hunt . . . just had to ask polite of the rancher or farmer . . . and they'd size you up right there on the spot.

Honesty was our day's measurin' stick. But as time went, I saw the strong get stronger during the depression . . . and even as the dust flew and the prices fell, we kept on keepin' on. I guess we had no choice. We lived by our farms and cattle. When the prices went down, we had to produce more just to keep up.

And seems like those prices never did come back up. We knew not to waste much of anything. Then another dry spell took a toll during the '50s. Lookin' back now, I can almost see the mesquite brush, huisache, tallow and the cedar brakes startin' to really come on . . . 'course I didn't see it at the time. Back when we lived and worked the land, why . . . cedar was a big part of all our fences . . . and value was realized by the hand cuttin' of it for the posts and stays . . .

But now, it seems, almost all at once, those days are gone. The li'l family farms and their soils did finally play out. Sold off most of the cattle because the grass ran out. The creeks dried up and the hills began to scour and wash after each rain. Li'l by li'l we are callin' what used to be the creek, an arroyo. They are cuttin' deep into the land now, which in turn lowers the water table and the springs no longer flow.

It was during the last generation where most all the kids grew up and moved to Dallas or Fort Worth and got 'em a "good job" . . . and all those fences, when they fell down, were rebuilt with Chinese steel T-posts, and the cedar sprouts have taken over the thin soils on the rocky uplands . . . and the mesquites, they take to the flats on the better soils. And still though, the grass is gone; for it is being shaded and out-competed for water by all the brush. Here in the west, I think we've probably brought on more of the desert . . . during three men's lives—my dad's, mine, and now my son's.

None of us really meant to do this intentionally. We didn't understand the people before us and the care of the land. We had no practical guides to follow, like the one in your hand. And we didn't see the value of the grass, like you can see . . . today. ◇

Saving All the Pieces

By Bill Neiman

Founder of Native American Seed, Bill Neiman grew up in west Texas while learning from his father about nature and all things native.

*'The first rule of intelligent tinkering
is to save all the pieces.'*

—Aldo Leopold

Bill Neiman, R. J. Neiman, by the fire with Jan at
Sierra Blanca, Texas.