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INGREG'S GARDEN

MY PRAIRIE HOME COMPANIONS

Since my people have lived in Texas, we've lost much of our natural heritage. By our own hands we extirpated the panther, the jaguar, the red wolf, the black bear, the buffalo, the passenger pigeon, the Carolina parakeet and the ivory billed woodpecker. We cut virtually every single timber tree and plowed almost every prairie. We also unleashed a torrent of invasive species that now ravage the land, including pigs, house sparrows, starlings, Chinese privet, Japanese honeysuckle and Chinese tallow.

Though East Texas was once known for its towering trees, the middle of Texas from top to bottom, along with our coastal plains, was known for its tall grasses. Less than two centuries ago, the great grass plains stretched from Canada down to Mexico, right through the heart of Texas. Unfortunately native grass makes for good cattle grazing (formerly buffalo), so much of it was overgrazed out of existence. And since prairie grasses produce copious quantities of organic matter each year, the soil beneath them tends to be fertile and productive, making them ideal for food and grain production. And, of course, nice flat areas are readymade for building urban population centers. Today 99 percent of the North American Great Plains has vanished with less than .004 percent of the tall grass prairie remaining in Texas. Our coastal prairie that stretches over into southwestern Louisiana has essentially vanished, as well, with what little is left colonized ad nauseam with dense stands of Chinese tallow. We once again find ourselves on the front row gazing at potential extinction.

I know lots of folks who don't care. As long as there is hot and

cold water and air in the house, food on the table and money in the bank account, why worry about things around you that you can't eat or spend? As a lover of nature and Texas, I can't ignore the

plight of my natural inheritance. It actually makes me very sad and even angry that I can't witness the many things that once grew, roamed and flew here.

While digging and dividing



Over the past several years, the author has been reclaiming 10 acres of East Texas prairie (above prior to restoration) using a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The land that was part of a family farmstead is now covered with native Texas prairie grasses (below).



Photos: Greg Grant

BY GREG GRANT
SFA Gardens
Nacogdoches, Texas

some bulbs this winter, I observed a large flock of redwing blackbirds flying directly overhead. It was a bit awe-inspiring. I noted that the duration was about 15 seconds for the entire undulating group to pass over. I couldn't help but think

of John James Audubon guesstimating the numbers in a flock of now-extinct passenger pigeons that took three hours to pass over in a column one mile in breadth. He noted that it was far below the average size, as some flocks took

days to fly over and literally darkened the sky. Audubon calculated his flock to contain more than one billion birds.

Though we'll never see passenger pigeons again, I've dedicated the rest of my life to creating wildlife habitat for those wild creatures that remain. I've focused on forest and field specifically for those that flap and fly. My current ongoing projects include an 8-acre pine savanna to mimic those that were in East Texas and the southeast when the settlers first arrived. They are basically open pine forests with native grasses and other herbaceous plants below. They were historically shaped and rejuvenated by fire and provided habitat for such birds as wild turkey, pine warblers, brown headed nuthatches and the endangered red cockaded woodpecker.

My pines are now approaching 20 years old. I thin them regularly to let in more sunlight and burn the stand annually to control woody undergrowth and to promote native grasses. I'm just now getting enough sunlight below to have a scattering of broomsedge bluestem, inland sea oats, slender wood oats and Virginia wildrye. As the sunlight reaches the forest floor, more will come. When our ancestors arrived in Texas they told of driving their wagons through towering pine forests with open prairies below. Though I have steady visitation from downy, hairy, red bellied and pileated woodpeckers, I won't be happy until red cockaded woodpeckers come home. Since they like hundred-year-old pines, I won't live to see them, but maybe my pines will.

Another major project for the last several years has been my 10-acre tall grass prairie re-creation project. Thanks to a grant from U.S. Fish and Wildlife, I cleared and reclaimed a portion of my Smith great-grandparent's old farm and seeded native Texas



Big bluestem was one of the grasses used in the author's restoration project.



Eastern gamagrass, an ancient relative of corn, thrives in moist bottomland.

grasses, including little bluestem, big bluestem, switch grass, Eastern gamagrass, Indian grass and sideoats grama, our state grass. I've also planted sugar cane plume grass in a few low spots that hold water during the wet season. First I killed the existing Bermuda grass and Bahia grass, and ran the disc over it several times. I seeded my grasses in April and raked them in with a tine harrow. The first year was a droughty one, but now going on its third year it's beginning to take on a life of its own. Indian grass has been my greatest success story. My tall grass prairie is home to frequent white-tailed deer and many seed-eating birds, including indigo buntings, painted buntings and blue grosbeaks. My hope is for turkey and quail to set up residence there. Both were once plentiful in East Texas but are hardly seen now.

If you're wondering how I got to be such a nut about field and feather, I think I got it from my Grandmother Ruth. She loved everything that lived and never met a weed that she didn't think was a pretty flower. Perhaps she got it from her great-grandmother Mary Ann Jones, who she said was an American Indian.

My latest tall grass project involves trying to create several acres of Eastern gamagrass, an ancient relative of corn. Since it thrives in moist bottomland, I cleared sweet gums saplings from an opening along our pretty little West Creek. After killing the saplings and existing Bahia grass, I seeded

and plugged in starts of Eastern gamagrass. It should be perfect habitat for wild turkey, should their numbers ever recover here. Ironically while plugging in the grass, I ran across a thousand-year-old pitted nut stone. The Caddo

Indians used these for holding hickory and black walnuts in place while cracking them with another stone. I couldn't help but think that my great-great-great grandmother Jones would be proud of my efforts. **TG**



Indiangrass is a beautiful native grass that provides cover and food for wildlife.



While plugging some grass, the author ran across this thousand-year-old, pitted nut stone left by the Caddo Indians.

SOURCE

Source for native Texas grass seed:

Native American Seed
3791 N. US Hwy 377
Junction, Texas 76849
800-728-3943
www.seedsource.com