

COMPANY PROFILE

Growing wild about nature

BY MELANIE LEE

FIVE YEARS AGO the giant IBM Corp. took to heart environmental restoration expert Bill Neiman's gentle admonition: "If you do just one thing for the environment this year . . . let it be wildflowers."

And so it was that a remarkable relationship was begun, one that might prove inspirational for other companies eager to heed the call of the wild.

In 1986, Bill and Jan Neiman ran a native plant nursery out of Flower Mound in Denton County. That year, they struck a deal with IBM to manage 800 acres at The Colony, a land bank IBM wanted to maintain with native plants. Bill Ross, then IBM land acquisition manager (now retired) remembers it well.

"I was the one who originated the idea — the problem was getting someone to execute it," he says. "The county extension folks in Denton tipped us off about Bill and Jan Neiman who had a retail shop selling natural landscaping. We hit it off. . . . They seemed to be the right kind of people; they wanted to do things natural."

Ross, who is a director for the National Audubon Society, says his bosses were impressed with the notion of preparing the land for future use by getting away from using fertilizers and chemicals and with addressing water problems by using native grasses. Besides, wildflowers just make a darn good looking spread.

"As Bill and Jan probably mentioned, we planted quite a bit of this — five acres near the entrance — it looks like a great big bouquet!" he says.

While the Neimans no longer have their nursery, (they, along with many other small business owners, fell victim in 1990 to the havoc created by bank failures and had to liquidate the nursery to pay off \$84,000 in called loans) they now operate Native American Seed, which retails seed locally and by mail-order catalogue, and consult as environmental restoration experts.

"We take on big, long-term projects," Bill Neiman says. "The Super Collider project is interested and has talked to us about consulting on restoring the area at the appropriate time. We also are returning about 500 acres to prairie on a site in Montague County for the Thompsen Foundation, which will use the site for educational purposes."

At The Colony, Neiman says he's planted about 800 native trees and did a cost projection based on his initial planting.

"Based on the first 500 planted, we estimated a long-term maintenance savings of \$800,000," he says.

Couple helps beautify companies' land using native flowers, grass



Fort Worth Star-Telegram / GLEN E. ELLMAN

For Bill Neiman and wife Jan, growing native North American grasses is just a matter of common sense.

The Denton county extension horticulturist who introduced Bill Ross and the Neimans, John Cooper, says the couple are bringing awareness to people and he wholeheartedly supports their efforts.

"I think they're bringing some great products to the public," Ross says. "The seed company they have started is bringing awareness of wildflowers and native buffalo grass turf to the forefront. This is a progressive effort, and I support their efforts when and where I can."

The Neimans say they guarantee that 100 percent of the seeds they sell are grown and harvested from fields within Texas and promise premium seed from the Texas native gene pool. They also are touting the use of buffalo grass for Texas lawns.

"I can't understand why other farmers aren't jumping on this," says Neiman of his pioneering efforts in the use of the native North American grass, which can thrive on as little as 12 inches of water a year, has no natural diseases or pests, withstands extreme heat and cold, doesn't respond to fertilizer and doesn't grow much over five to six inches.

Besides their work as environmental restoration and land managers for IBM at The Colony, the Neimans for the last two years have worked with TU Electric to seed 40 acres with wildflowers each year under the highlines in North Dallas along LBJ Freeway, Military Parkway, Regal Row and other heavily traveled corridors.

Ever on the cutting edge, Bill Neiman is a director at large for the Texas Organic Growers Association, a group he says is exploring with American Airlines possibilities of producing organic produce for the airline's first-class flights. And just last week Neiman traveled to South Texas to conduct his first bluebonnet seed harvest in a deal he struck with a landowner who wanted the things off his property.

As awareness of water and land usage issues continues to increase, many progressive companies and individuals want alternatives to old and increasingly, inefficient stewardship.

"For people who are open to new thinking, Bill Neiman is being heard," Cooper says. "It's a hard thing to say though, if that's people in our area. You could say he is at the cutting edge of an industry that could well attract investors. I myself am receiving more calls from people interested in native plants for landscaping, including the general public and small businesses."

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