

# GuideDaily

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## GARDENING

# 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 dropseed, sideoats grama (Texas' official state grass) — they're all beautiful to Jaynes, a Plano 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 reaches 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.



JUAN GUAJARDO/Special Contributor

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**Bluestem** was transplanted to Connemara Conservancy.





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.

# Jaynes advocates, preserves native grasses

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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.

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Rich Jaynes



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

Jaynes forages 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 NPSOT also are good sources of native grasses; members trade plants and seeds among themselves.

To make his demonstration



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Strolling the meadow at Connemara Conservancy's preserve in Allen, he points out four plots of native grasses, his "babies."

"We transplanted this big bluestem from west of Celina. It was in the right of way for the Dallas North Tollway extension." He bends to uproot a Johnson-grass invader. "It's exciting what happens when you get some kids out here who haven't seen prairie before. You'd never know there's a highway over there" — he points toward Central Expressway — "or a new housing development beyond those trees. They get down in the grass and see the flowers, the insects, the web of life."

The little plots may not look like much until Jaynes reminds visitors that tall-grass prairie is the most imperiled ecosystem in the nation. Every month he leads trail hikes at Connemara. "In the spring, we call them wildflower walks, and then, as the year goes on and the flowers fade, we call them habitat walks."

Most home gardeners don't possess enough acreage for a prairie, but they can still enjoy the color, variety and hardy rustic beauty of native grasses, many of which peak in

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Photos by JUAN GUAJARDO/Special Contributor

**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.

autumn, when most other ornamental plants are winding down. They provide interest, texture and movement most of the year: the rusty hues of big bluestem (also called turkey foot), the jewel-like arc of wood-oats, furry lances of long-spoke tridens, the yellow Indian grass that blooms with tiny golden trumpets. Clumps and groupings of grasses can serve as unusual focal points in

a landscape; they are gaining popularity as choices — planted in bold masses of single species — to accompany new modern and contemporary designs, both residential and commercial.

"Even if you have a certain kind of homeowners association," Jaynes says, "they can't tell you what to do in your backyard."

Native grasses do not

require much maintenance. Planted in their natural environment, they require little or no irrigation.

There are several sources for mail-order seeds, and then there's the option of finding your own. "The TxDOT right of way is fair game," Jaynes says. On back roads, as long as you can park safely, you can gather seed yourself, he said.

"Look along the fence line

where they don't mow," Jaynes says. "Slide your hand along the top of the flowering part and collect the seed. Plant it in seed trays in the fall, and in the spring it will pop up."

One of his favorite places to collect is along FM121 in Grayson County. Another is U.S. Highway 380 in north Collin County, and, for switchgrass, he combs State Highway 289 between Celina

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

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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.

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## Resources

Connemara Conservancy:  
connemaraconservancy.org  
Native Plant Society of Texas:  
npsot.org

Native Prairies Association of  
Texas: texasprairie.org

Native American Seed:  
seedsources.com