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The Last Piece of the Puzzle



Photos: Suzanne Lohry

Bill Neiman, founder of Native American Seed, realized long ago that he could do more with seeds than live plants. Here he is harvesting seeds of native grasses to be used to restore and heal the land. Neiman feels our jobs are more than to preserve and protect. We must reclaim and restore.

Bill Neiman had an epiphany in 1989: he realized for certain that he was bad for the environment.

That particular insight had been developing over the preceding decade due to a variety of factors based on Neiman's professional work, his residency in one of the fastest developing areas of the country, his serendipitous association with environmental visionaries, his own considerable powers of observation and deductive reasoning, and nature itself.

Neiman's lawn care business — which he had started as a teenager with a borrowed shovel, rake and lawnmower, and which he had worked hard to grow into a successful landscape construction/irrigation system installation company with 45 employees — was doing well. Following conventional practices of the '70s and '80s, Neiman had built his livelihood around installing non-native landscapes in the rapidly growing Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex, putting in irrigation systems to keep them hydrated, spraying them with chemical fertilizers to make them grow, applying herbicides to ensure they were weed-free and regularly dousing them with pesticides to keep the bugs away. He had always enjoyed the work, taking satisfaction in coming in behind bulldozers and establishing people's yards with live plants and lush, green lawns. As he watched more and more of the Blackland Prairie succumb to those selfsame bulldozers, however, Neiman began to suspect that his business was doing well for all the wrong reasons.

In those days, Neiman and his family lived in Flower Mound, which is now considered a suburb of Dallas but which at that time was still a small town. The community is distinguished by and derives its name from a 12-acre geological oddity — a mound covered by an unusually large assortment of native wildflowers that rises about 50 feet above the surrounding terrain. The site is believed to have

been a ceremonial ground sacred to Indians. Flower Mound was also home to Otto Consolvo, a tile setter whose wife was a Cherokee Indian, and Otto was clearly a man ahead of his time. Recognizing that fast-encroaching development was a threat to the mound's existence, Consolvo made it his mission to ensure the mound was preserved in its pristine and unique state. Thanks largely to Consolvo's efforts, the Town Council negotiated with a developer in 1983 to deed the mound in perpetuity to the Mound Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to keeping the original character of the site. Bill Neiman became involved in that effort and was greatly influenced by it; he would later go on to serve as the Mound Foundation's president.

Mother Nature also had a hand in Neiman's evolution to conservationist. "Beginning in the early 1980s, a series of climate events conspired to make me start thinking about what I was doing. North Texas experienced the worst drought in decades, the worst freeze in a hundred years, and then two years of back-to-back flooding. The landscapes that I had spent so much time installing and maintaining began to die," recalled Neiman. "I noticed, though, that native plants in the area not only survived — they could handle whatever nature threw at them and continued to do just fine. I began to see that I was part of the problem."

In 1987, Neiman entered into a 10-year contract with IBM to undertake the ecological restoration of its 1,600-acre corporate land bank located at The Colony, another Dallas suburb. For years, the site had been farmland dedicated to producing cotton and maize in the conventional, non-organic manner. Fortunately, IBM's Vice-President of Real Estate Development at the time also happened to be the National Secretary of the Audubon Society, and he was, as well, a man with a vision. He wanted to make the site a model of corporate land stewardship and return it to its original state as a native grassland prairie. The pro-



The Native American Seed Company logo reflects the philosophy of the business without using words.

cess of reclaiming an area so large was a daunting endeavor, but Neiman kept at it. He began to learn about native grass seeds and even developed tools to safely harvest them for reseeding. The more he worked, the more he observed and learned of nature's ways, watching native grasses and forbs regain their foothold in what once had been part of a vast prairie that stretched from Canada to Mexico. By the time the contract finished, Neiman had a profound appreciation for the resilience of native plants and for working with nature instead of against it.

As Neiman's experience and understanding grew, he became increasingly concerned about the rapid loss not only of his beloved Blackland Prairie, but also of open space in general all over Texas and the plants native to those areas. He still had his landscaping company, and although it had evolved to include more restoration work, he wanted to do more to help with conservation efforts. In 1990, he closed the business.

An epiphany — the sudden, deep comprehension of something — is often described as occurring when a person has "found the last piece of the puzzle and now sees the whole picture." For Neiman, the last piece of the puzzle was a tiny one indeed: seeds.

"The power of seeds kept growing within my mind," explained Neiman. "I realized that in the palm of my hand I could hold an acre's worth of live seeds, but it's very difficult to put an acre's

BY SUZANNE LABRY
Contributing Writer



Neiman developed a profound appreciation for the resilience of native plants, including these native grass seedlings.

worth of live plants in the back of a truck. I shifted my focus away from the nursery business and into finding out where native prairies still existed and finding ways to gather the seeds while still leaving enough behind for the other life forms that depend on them. I decided that instead of cleaning up behind the bulldozers, it would be smarter to get in front of them."

And so Neiman's focus changed. He began to redefine the concept of landscaping and his goal became that of sharing his experience with others. "I want to provide alternatives for people who would actually like to *do* something about their environment," said Neiman. "I've learned to look at native plants for landscaping, as water supplies become scarcer and more unaffordable. Think about the names of plants we commonly see in our urban Texas landscapes: Caribbean St. Augustine and Bermuda grasses, Chinese holly, Japanese privet (waxleaf ligustrum), Asian jasmine, India hawthorn, and so on and so on. That tells us something. Those plants are not from here. We have to change the way we do things. People need

turn to plants that are native to their area or bioregion."

In 1995, Neiman moved his family to the western edge of the Texas Hill Country, to a place on the Llano River near Junction. There he established Native American Seed, a company dedicated to selling native grass and wildflower seeds to the public, and Neiman Environments, a large-scale restoration and development consulting service aimed at helping those with properties over 40 acres in size develop an ecologically sound approach to their landscapes.

Neiman still spends a lot of time harvesting seeds, perfecting the equipment he uses to do so and sharing with anyone who'll listen his experience and concerns about the rapid disappearance of open spaces and their native vegetation. When asked if he sometimes feels like the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dike, Neiman laughed and said, "Well, sometimes maybe, but I am a big believer in the power of one. And I have a lot of faith in seeds."

"The answers were known by the Native people," he continued. "We must now piece together what

we can, from what remains. Our jobs are more than to preserve and protect. We must reclaim and restore. But the most important job we have is to educate. We need to educate ourselves, each other and especially our children. We must set the example. Children know about what's happening in the rainforests. What we need to help them understand is that the prairie is Texas' version of the rainforest and that it is being destroyed just as rapidly. It is time for all Americans to adopt a code of land ethics."

Bill Neiman puts his preaching into practice and his is a most persuasive voice for change. If more of us could heed his wakeup call to look at our landscapes from a different perspective, we might all have an epiphany of our own. **TG**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Native American Seed
1-800-728-4043 or (325) 446-3600
info@seedsource.com
<http://www.seedsource.com/>
Free catalog: <http://www.seedsource.com/catalog/requestcatalog.asp>