

NATIVE ASTERS • TOUGHER TURF • TATUME SQUASH

# TEXAS GARDENER

May/June 2012 Vol. XXXI No. 4

The magazine for Texas gardeners, by Texas gardeners

**COOKING  
WITH  
HERBS**

**AMAZING  
PEPPERS**

**SOUTHERN  
SEED LEGACY**

[www.TexasGardener.com](http://www.TexasGardener.com)



\*\*\*AUTOMATED DIGIT 76849  
231092 MAY/JUN 12  
BILL & JAN NEIMAN  
NATIVE AMERICAN SEED  
3791 N US HIGHWAY 377  
JUNCTION TX 76849-6502

P2





# Tougher Go No

Texas landscapes took a beating this year. Scant rain and record heat inflicted the worst drought in Texas since the Dust Bowl. Municipalities from El Paso to Beaumont rationed water, allotting homeowners days on which to water, an amount insufficient to keep traditional beds, trees and lawns in good health. St. Augustine enthusiasts fought back. They crept out during the night to sprinkle their landscape investments, hoping that neighbors either wouldn't see them hogging more than their share of water

BY JULIE HERMAN  
Freelance Writer

— or, if spotted, that the neighbor wouldn't turn them in.

What about lawns encourages this kind of behavior? Lawn is defined as small openings in the forest canopy where grazing creatures enjoyed munching the local crop of short grasses. "Lawns first became popular in the landscape during the 1880s," says Dr. Mark Simmons of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin. Large estate owners grazed their cattle on the short-grass plantings, providing both food for the animals and a way to keep the grass under control. During the 1950s and 1960s, "they became a symbol of stature," Dr. Simmons says.

Current-day Texans may not have an estate on which cattle roam, but we all feel the urge now and then to sink our toes into lush, thick turf. Lawns bring back memories of youth, when we dashed across carefully maintained lawns to tag someone or sprawled on the soft *green* carpet — before the fire ant invasion — and stared at the clouds as they wandered by.

Few people realize that we live water-poor every year. It only becomes achingly apparent to homeowners when free water stops falling from the sky. Out of the 2.5 percent of Earth's water considered potable, 70 percent of that water is tied up in the icecaps. We





# Is Turf Native?

are left with the approximately 0.007 percent of water in lakes, rivers, reservoirs and underground sources shallow enough to be tapped affordably. And what do we use to irrigate our turf? Treated water that is transported (via pipe) miles and miles to our faucets. Bill Neiman of the Native American Seed Company says, "Seventy-five percent of Texans' potable water goes to irrigating our landscapes. Young people would have the right to slit your throat for using water this way."

We need to plant smarter.

Neiman found a smarter way to deal with drought cycles — get ahead of them. Up until the late

1980s he installed enough St. Augustine sod in Dallas/Ft. Worth suburbs to fill a long line of semi-trucks. Then the drought cycle hit. A client phoned him. Her landscape was either dead or dying from heat exhaustion. She could not water enough to make up for the drought and the high temperatures. He hung up the phone knowing there wasn't a lot he had to offer her to save the plants she'd just spent so much money to install.

That day he drove past acres and acres of undeveloped land. Oddly, where the suburban lots were all browning, the native prairie still showed green. He had

found the answer to the drought dilemma. Neiman's epiphany? For the natives, "it wasn't the worst drought in their existence," he says. He stopped installing water-hungry varieties. Instead, Neiman went out onto the prairies, gathered seed and started to tinker with the possibilities.

Most water-savvy advice about turf in the landscape recommends that you reduce the space allotted to a lawn. Neiman is no exception. He says to plant turf in a 300-square-foot-or-less area. Dr. Simmons comes at this from a different angle, saying that it pains him to hear people criminalizing turf grasses. His view? It's not a



## SOURCES

Native Sun Turfgrass  
and Thunder Turf  
Native American Seed Company  
<http://www.seedsource.com/>  
(800) 728-4043

Habiturf, developed by the Lady Bird  
John Wildflower Center:  
4801 La Crosse Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78739  
<http://www.wildflower.org/>  
(512) 232-0100

Available at  
Douglas King Seeds  
<http://www.dkseeds.com/>  
(210) 661-4191

Native American Seed Company  
<http://www.seedsource.com>  
(800) 728-4043

crime to have a lawn — the crime is in choosing the wrong grass for the job.

Lawns as we know them are monocultures. One grass, and only one grass, is allowed in that space. With the imported, highly cultivated turf varieties most homeowners install, this involves a ton of treated water, a lot of effort and often a boatload of chemical assistance. Native varieties of turf grasses are available to the homeowner. Buffalograss, growing naturally to a height of five inches and requiring just an inch of water a month seems ideal, unless you live in the Houston metro area and you get a normal rain year. Soggy conditions kill this grass, leaving holes in the turf ripe for weeds to

bloom. Blue grama is another native that has a short growth habit and requires little water. Neither of these allows much foot traffic — no tag for the neighborhood children.

What happens when lawns mimic nature? If you walk out onto an undisturbed open prairie, you will find 20 varieties of plants per square foot. Native grass areas can have more than 20 varieties in a square foot. Some grow inches high, others feet high. The trick is to pull the best short grass seeds and test them. Dr. Simmons and Neiman may have different advice about the area to use with turf in a home landscape, but on this issue both experts spoke as one: it is best to have more than one



Photo: Mark Simmons

Unlike traditional St. Augustine grass, Habiturf requires only about an inch of water per month and mowing every 10 to 14 days.



variety to make a healthy sustainable lawn.

Buffalograss and blue grama, both drought-tolerant native grasses, form the backbone of the polyculture Bill Neiman came up with for his first native grass seed blended product called Sunturf. He recently added a third variety, curly mesquite grass, to the mix and called it Thunder Turf. Dr. Simmons and his team at Lady Bird Johnson have developed a similar mix that began as a blend of seven different varieties native to Texas called Habiturf. His test plots showed the mixed seed planting outperformed any single grass in terms of resilience. It required about an inch of rain a month, mowing every 10 to 14 days and had few, if any, weeds.

The only downside to this new mix is that you have to completely prep the area you are going to plant. This means removing that damaged St. Augustine plot you've been watering so carefully. Think of it as a trip to the gym that you don't have to take or payback for all that lost sleep last summer. "It would be nice to drop the seed into the ground and have the grass grow as if it is some magic seed from the Land of Oz," Dr. Simmons says, but "the soil needs to be tilled and fertilized with organic compost." Turning the soil twice within a couple of weeks may irritate your HOA, but it does a good job of getting rid of all the vegetation and seeds present in that area. Seeds of short native grasses are fine enough so that



Photo: Courtesy of Native American Seed

**Thunder Turf is a blend of three native grass species developed by Native American Seed Co., Junction.**

casting them on top of the soil is sufficient for germination.

February to May is the most efficient time to establish your new turf. Some plots planted in the heat of summer may do well as long as they have enough wa-

ter to grow. Water regularly until established. Then water only once a month and mow twice a month — and enjoy that hammock you buy with all the money you used to spend on fertilizer and weed treatments.

Go forth and go native — short native turf, that is. **TG**

## LESS IS MORE

Simulating the natural conditions in a native grassland — low-nutrient soils, native grasses, occasional rainfall, occasional grazing — can help us achieve a sustainable, healthy native lawn. So:

- Prepare the soil. Prairie soil takes thousands of years to form; you will need to kick-start yours.
- Use appropriate native species. If they couldn't take the heat, they wouldn't be here.
- Mow less. Natives grow much slower than overfed St. Augustine and Bermuda grass.
- Irrigate with occasional deep water events and rainfall, and maybe let it go dormant in summer.
- Minimize nutrient inputs. Native prairies aren't synthetically fertilized.

For more information and to see how the ongoing native lawn research holds, visit <http://www.wildflower.org/nativelawns/>.

— Courtesy of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Austin, Texas

**800.728.4043**  
**CATALOG**  
**FREE**  
[seedsources.com](http://seedsources.com)

**Wildflower &  
Grass Seed**

*...helping people restore the earth*