



A CONSERVATION NOTEBOOK

by Homer Stevens

Varied and unexpected environmentally related events are the norm for our fascinating Hill Country. Interesting things have happened here on the Farm this Spring. We were headed into the summer under the worst drought conditions in 70+ years when suddenly in May we get over 7" of rain followed by 2.64" in June. Ground that has appeared barren for months is suddenly supporting knee high vegetation of every kind imaginable.

My Master Naturalist training tells me to let it go. Diversity is a good thing. The tall grass and forbs will control erosion while providing a home for all kinds of living creatures. Beautiful butterflies will feed on the nectar of the wildflowers, beautiful birds will come to eat the butterfly larvae and the wildflower seeds. The list could go on, but uncontrolled diversity would also include chiggers, fleas, mosquitos, scorpions, centipedes, and even rattlesnakes and copperheads.

Even on a large working ranch that was depending on cattle, sheep, and goats, as was the case with earlier stages of Hill Country development, ranchers were advised to graze half of the forage produced on their pasture land, but to always leave enough leaf area for the plants to regenerate to provide more grazing at a later time while continuing with enough root system to control erosion.

It makes sense that the take half leave half concept should apply to yard mowing as well as grazing, especially considering our expensive and limited water resources. Businesses that are tourist oriented need a short grass alternative.

The same folks that gave us the graze half leave half theory have worked at alternative grass species that can survive our frequently harsh conditions while at the same time provide some erosion control, and harbor less of the possible pests. One of the first choices for testing for the required qualities is a true native grass, Buffalograss

Our Natural Resource Conservation Service, The Agrilife Extension folks as well as a

number of private plant breeders have done a lot of work with this native cultivar.

I will quote the sales pitch from the Ecological Solutions publication of the Native American Seed Co. located in Junction, TX. "Buffalograss a 5-8 inch short, sod-forming grass. Lives on as little as 12 inches of water per year, spreading by seed and surface runners. Buffalograss has no natural diseases or pests, does not respond to fertilizer, and withstands extreme hot or cold. Found from Minnesota and Montana down to Mexico, thriving in all types of soils, environmentally responsible alternative to Bermuda or St. Augustine."

Keep in mind that this company is selling seed. Here on the Farm I've been planting small patches of this stuff for over 20 years, and I'm sold on its value as a potential short grass lawn for large areas. Everything the Native American Seed Co. says is true, but there are some other factors that folks should be aware of. Before undertaking extensive plantings. (1) The seed does not germinate evenly, This is true of almost all native seed. The DNA in every seed is a little different. This enables the species to survive, but not necessarily every individual. (2) Buffalograss seedlings grow very slowly. They start as spider web thin wisps $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ " long.

These tiny wisps are apparently very tough and retain life under extremely harsh conditions waiting for environmental improvements such as rainfall to occur. (3) The varieties I have tried have almost no shade tolerance. (4) Buffalograss prefers deep soil, but is not particular what kind--sand, loam, caliche, clay are all OK (5) Buffalograss does not compete well with other grasses and weeds under what we consider good conditions. It prefers drought followed by wet, and it does not need fertilizer. (6) It will turn brown quickly when drought conditions set in, but turn green very quickly even with light rainfall.

These six observations are certainly not meant as discouragement, only as factors that anyone contemplating plantings of this kind of lawn area should be aware of. As mentioned

at the beginning of the article some interesting things happened on the Farm this Spring. Our recent lengthy drought followed by adequate rainfall has resulted in positive developments with our Buffalograss trials. The tough little wisps of grass, and dormant seed took advantage of the conditions and spread significantly. We have a number of fair sized patches of the grass.

Due to our prior experiences our efforts to encourage the spread of this environmentally adapted naturally short grass will involve (1) setting our mowers relatively high 3 1/2 to 4 inches attempting to keep weeds and KR Bluestem from going to seed while adhering to the take half leave half theory. (2) Resist the temptation to fertilize the small patches of Buffalograss because this will encourage the weeds and other competing grasses more than it will the Buffalo. (3) We will refrain from overseeding the patches of Buffalo with Rye grass in the fall because the Buffalo does not like competition.

Nothing can ever be simple, but by trial and error and sharing experiences, we will continue to learn and improve our techniques of caring for our fascinating Hill Country environment.



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