

Serendipity: Growing Grama Pays Off with Blades of Glory

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Cultivating grass from seed takes hard work and a lot of trial and error, but the results make it worthwhile.

I used to think that “watching the grass grow” was a euphemism for being idle. Then I decided to grow a patch of blue grama, a drought-tolerant native grass. Now, it’s hard to believe that seeds are a sustainable way to run the business of nature.



Karen Telleen-Lawton

In the fall, landscapers terraced our yard, installing gopher wire and irrigation PVC on the newly flat field. The day they seeded, my husband and I found a flock of bushtits enjoying Thanksgiving dinner.

Soon we had a lush field of irrigated weeds. It wasn’t just the bushtits’ appetites. Consulting the [Santa Barbara Botanic Garden](#), I learned that blue grama was a warm-season grass. They advised us to weed all winter and spring, and then replant it with plugs grown from seed.

In April, I showed up for Andrew Wyatt’s seed-starting class, figuring it would be a cinch. What more was there to say but “stick the seeds in a container, water them and watch them grow”? I had just read an article about researchers in Israel coaxing a 2,000-year-old date palm seed to grow. If they could sprout an ancient seed, surely I could do the same with fresh ones.

Hours later, my head whirled and my hands gripped dirt-smudged handouts. They pointed out every conceivable combination of soils, seed covers and methods of extracting seeds from seed covers. If you gathered seed from the wild, you might have to soak it, freeze it, hammer it or maybe burn it to extract it from its cover.

Fortunately, my blue grama seeds were soil-ready. I had gathered egg cartons since Easter to use as planting containers. My first batch of 60 died when the shallow containers dried out more regularly than I remembered to water. Then I learned about plug flats. I bought five 6-inch-by-12-inch plug flats and began again. Most of them sprouted nicely with my daily spritzing, then withered in a few days. I added more seeds.

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It was well into planting season when I finally got the hang of keeping them moist until they germinated, then allowing the topsoil to dry before deep-watering the germinated seedlings. I finally had several hundred plugs in various stages of health.

In early June, I prepared the field with four days of half-hour watering followed by two days of drying. My son and I began planting in the cool of the evening, after work. We labored until we could no longer see where we had sowed. I finished planting at daybreak.

At that moment, I felt the pride of a farmer. My back, knees and wrists were aching, but I was confident I had earned the right to watch the grass grow. The Middle East scholars must have felt something like this triumph, I decided, when they succeeded with the Judean palm, named Methuselah after the oldest person in Bible. Three years later, it is a 4-foot seedling.

My grass is growing, too. The plugs are healthy, and some of the original seed crop, planted out of season and decimated by birds, is sprouting. I'm weaning the grass off daily water. Next week, they graduate to a semi-arid schedule: 20 minutes every other week.

In the past century, this slope-turned-flat field has transitioned from foothill chaparral to cattle range to avocado orchard, succumbing to root rot. Now it will be a reasonably sustainable landscape, resistant to erosion and attractive to native insects and birds. I also hope it will be sufficiently attractive for a wedding reception or two, a healthy crop of grandchildren and time spent watching the native grass grow.

Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.canyonvoices.com.

