

Grass is the forgiveness of nature

DAVID AMME

The California Native Grass Association was founded in the fall of 1991. The stated purpose of CNGA was to:

1. Promote native grass technology as needed to restore ecosystems,
2. Coordinate and support the production and marketing of commercial quantities of native grass seed,
3. Educate our communities on the economic and environmental values of native grasses, and
4. Endorse conservation efforts to preserve existing native grassland habitat.

The road to founding CNGA stretched back to a series of meetings held between the winters of 1990 and 1991, led by Bob Delzell of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Our first issue of *Grasslands* was published in April 1991. But the road stretched even further back when I brought the first large bag of purple needlegrass to Stewart Brother's Farm in Rio Vista. At the time, Scott Stewart was successfully growing SCS-developed Zorro fescue and Blando brome, and Berber orchard grass. Scott was eager to find new grasses, especially native California grasses.

The first bag of purple needlegrass and Molate fescue was collected by me, Hunter Wallof, David Kaplow, and Denise Martinez. We were a ragtag nonprofit restoration organization called Design Associates Working with Nature (DAWN)*. We started out in 1985 with some funding from the City of Berkeley to transform the Berkeley dump landfill site into an open space park. We didn't exactly succeed in this transformation. Today much of the area is dominated by kikuyu grass. Along the way we got hooked on the idea of using native grasses to restore this open space park. We couldn't find a grower who would produce native grasses. Bob Slayback, who

*See photos on pages 4, 5, and 7.

worked for the SCS in Davis, suggested that I talk to Scott Stewart. You might say the rest is history. After some initial unsuccessful haggling in the Holland Ranch parking area, I slammed my tailgate and got ready to leave. Next thing I knew Scott cut a check, and I drove home along the levee roads with a shit-grinning smile that I just couldn't suppress.

Scott soon grew the "Big Three" (meadow barley, California brome, blue wildrye), purple needlegrass, and Molate red fescue. Scott had started ConservaSeed. By that time the SCS had developed the "Rio" form of creeping wildrye, and John Anderson developed the local valley form of slender wheatgrass.

What truly sparked CNGA were the open houses that Scott Stewart threw at the ConservaSeed Grass Farm at Holland Ranch near Rio Vista. He invited designers, landscape architects, planners, and public agencies to see the native grass fields and have a free Bar-B-Q lunch. After the initial years of ever increasing attendance at the ConservaSeed open house, we were all looking around and saying: "We need to start an organization and get things going."

Around this same time, John Anderson, an activist conservationist and veterinarian-

turned-farmer in Yolo County founded Hedgerow Farms and began producing local central California native grass seed and developing sustainable native landscapes and hedgerows. Additionally, Victor Schaff at S&S Seeds began native grass production for Southern California ecotypes on his ranch in Los Alamos.

At first, the California Native Grass Association was focused on identifying, growing, and promoting native grasses. This has gradually expanded into conservation, restoration, management, and preservation of all the native grassland ecosystems of California. In the winter of 2005, CNGA was unanimously changed to the California Native *Grasslands* Association.

For me, it was an honor to be the catalyst, collector, and explorer for CNGA. It was nice reading what I wrote in April 20 years ago. We've all come a long way and there is still so much to do.

Many more native grasses are commercially available today. These include:

- Thingrass (*Agrostis pallens*)
- Squirreltail (*Elymus elymoides* and *E. multisetus*)
- Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*)
- Junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*)
- California melic (*Melica californica*)
- One-sided bluegrass (*Poa secunda*)
- Small fescue (*Vulpia microstachys*)

Note from a CNGA founder

CNGA's contribution to ecosystem restoration and landscaping is real. In the early days when commercial quantities of native seeds were available, it was difficult to get buy-in by public agencies, park and refuge managers, the general public, landscape architects, etc. CNGA became and still is a major catalyst, teaching and promoting the importance and use of native grassland species. Almost all restoration projects now incorporate native grassland species as part of the plant palette. What was an initial vision and struggle has now become an accepted standard. CNGA has played a major role in making this happen. May the next 20 years continue to expand our influence.

—John Anderson, CNGA founding member and past President; owner of Hedgerow Farms

NATIVE PERENNIAL GRASSES, continued from page 12

California. Native red fescue is a very attractive ornamental grass that is aesthetically pleasing, whether mown

or not. Its fine foliage and spreading character make it ideally suited to natural landscapes and low-input buffers.

Reprinted from the April 1991 issue of *Grasslands* (vol. 1, issue 1)