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LANDSCAPES FOR A CHANGING WORLD

PERMACULTURE IN PRACTICE: STRAW-BOOK SWALES MAKE MEADOWS EASILY

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Since erosion control and land restoration are a couple of Santa Fe Permaculture's specialties, we typically get anxious phone calls from property owners after major rainstorms. Sometimes, due to a vicious monsoon or two, they've lost a chunk of a backyard patio. Other times, they report a flooded garage or a vestibule that came "this close" to full-blown inundation. Most of the time, however, there is less drama in their stories, and people are simply trying to do their best to prevent the continued slip-sliding-away of their real estate.

One of the interesting characteristics of high-desert storm events revolves around how localized their epicenters can be. After Hurricane Alex, we received three queries from folks who all lived within a radius of 2,000 feet. None of them knew each other, but each was clearly rattled in their own way by what they discovered at dawn. Evidently, the northwest corner of Eldorado got especially hammered during the wee hours of July 3. "Looking out the living-room window at 3 a.m.," one client in the affected area told me, "I not only couldn't see the lights of my neighbor's house, but I also couldn't even see my own driveway."

I'm pleased to report that an April installation of straw-book swales (just like those described in my May column) passed this extreme-rain test with verdant colors. Located on either side of the aforementioned rain-whacked driveway, the straw books held up perfectly as they simultaneously did their job of retaining native seeds, soil, bugs, mycelium, and moisture. About a week after the storm, I was scheduled to sow a mix of grass seed on the same job. "In my 10 years here," the client said as we walked around together, "I've never seen this part of my property look so green."

Thanks to the straw-book swales, the place did look much greener, but there were still vast swaths of exposed soil. Mostly unrecovered from the overgrazing of long ago, you could almost hear the ravaged land begging for blue grama, alkali sacaton, galleta, and all of the other seeds in Plants of the Southwest's "Dryland Blend" seed mix.

Around the disturbed areas of the project, I had waited to sow because I knew much of the seed would have blown away between our spring windy season and our sometimes rainy (and sometimes not) summer season. The revegetation job also had to work around a path that led to seven bird feeders on the south side of the property, so waiting to sow until just before monsoon season made sense to keep the seeds from being eaten.

Even though we installed a roof waterharvesting cistern at my client's home, no supplemental irrigation would be directed to the seeded areas. With nothing but a natural binder mixed in with the seed and a light straw mulch strewn on top of it, the seed will be on its own. But given the healthier microclimate we've jumpstarted, the grass will not be even greener on the other side of the fence.

