

Sowing seeds: It's just like 'Being There'

Getting grasses and wildflowers to grow without supplemental water is downright difficult in the desert. Poor soils, strong winds, ravenous wildlife and little rain make sowing seed seem like some sick satire illustrating man's subserviance to nature.

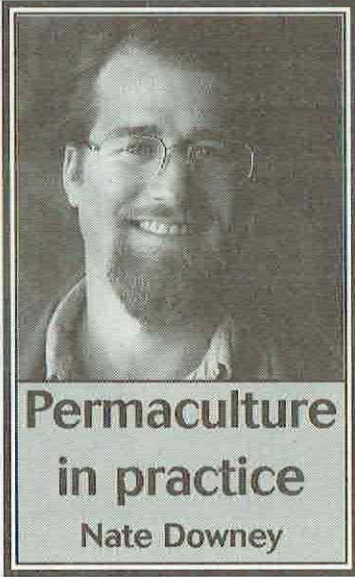
Fortunately, with the help of modern meteorology and a basic knowlegde of what seeds need you can reclaim your land. It just takes a little preparation, an educated guess and maybe some dumb luck.

The first step in being prepared is to acquire appropriate seed. A wide variety of drought-tolerant species is best, because each species has a particular combination of conditions to which it will most vigorously respond. Santa Fe-based Plants of the Southwest, for example, carries wonderful grass mixes such as Dryland Blend and Sandy Soil Stabilizer as well as an excellent wildflower package called High Plains Piñon-Juniper Mix.

Diversity is especially effective when mixes include warm- and cool-season species. This ensures that more bare ground is covered throughout the year. A wide seed palette will also create a more productive and beautiful landscape – not only by being healthier, but by revealing nature's various contrasts of color, form and texture.

This diversity also benefits the land, because groups of companion plants tend to grow in distinct patches, which then protect each other from harsh winds and our omnipotent sun. Other than in cases where a particular aesthetic or need is to be considered, both wildflowers and grasses should be sown together in the area that you wish to reclaim.

Think of wildflowers as reformers of sociopolitical landscapes. Such figures support and are supported by "grassroots" movements. Wildflowers and grasses have a similar symbiotic relationship. The down side is also similar:



We pay a steeper price for both wildflowers and reformers. The former cost more money at the nursery. The latter (think Lincoln, Gandhi, Martin Luther King) often pay the highest of prices.

I digress. In addition to ensuring diversity, don't cover your seeds with too much or too little soil. Seeds generally like to be buried as deep as their width. Simply raking

an area after seeds are sown works great.

Seeds also need mulch, but not too much. In order to retain moisture and protect seeds from wind, a thin layer of straw or acidified compost is a must. Natural binder, or tackifier, can be purchased from a local nursery and should be mixed with your seed before sowing. Binder may also be sprinkled on top of your mulch. When wet, binder adheres seed to soil.

It also never hurts to prepare your ground by raking or digging in compost, which can be delivered in bulk by local nurseries and landscape supply yards such as Santa Fe Greenhouses, Payne's Soils and Ulibarri Landscape Materials. If you really have your act together, you have already sheet-mulched your land. At any rate some organic matter mixed with your existing caliche is essential, but use sparingly with wildflowers, many of which don't like overly rich soil.

If you truly do not plan on

watering the area that you sow, you will need daily access to a reliable five-day forecast, because your all-important educated guess will be based on preparing for one of those weeks with four or five days full of rain. When you see that one of those wonderful weeks has finally arrived, don't delay.

Timing is key. Our average monsoon season starts July 7 in Santa Fe. But remember, expecting monsoons to start on a specific date makes about as much sense as attempting to predict an election five months from November. That is why being ready to reclaim a landscape at the right time is an essential component of successfully seeding areas of barren, erosive ground.

Nate Downey is president of Santa Fe Permaculture, Inc. a local landscape design, consultation and installation company. Interested readers may contact Downey at nate@sfpermaculture.com.