

New grass needs little water

Wildflower Center seeks more business partners

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Mark Simmons, director of the Ecosystem Design Group at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, is commercializing a new kind of grass he's developed that needs a lot less water.

This comes at a time when an untold number of Texans will need to replace their lawns due to the drought and heat wave.

Called Habiturf, the turf is a mix of native grass species, including Buffalo grass, blue grama and curly-mesquite grass. The blades grow slower and when mature can remain green with one watering every two weeks or at least survive on one watering a month. Most grass requires weekly watering to remain healthy, especially in heat.

Habiturf is the result of research funded by Wal-Mart Corp., which is seeking new store lawns that require less mowing. It was coincidental that the study came to a head during a drought; scientists at the Wildflower Center began watering the test lawn once a month. And while the grass turned brown in the dry heat, it showed resiliency to come back when watered, unlike other grasses such as St. Augustine.

The mix has been trademarked and just became available from native seed supplier Douglas King Co. in San Antonio. Simmons said the Wildflower Center is open to partnering with other companies that can help it further commercialize Habiturf.

Although the new product is being marketed in the Southwest where it grows best, it is available nationally online via Douglas King Co. The Wildflower Center will funnel its 6 percent royalty from seed sales into more research, and hopes to develop other types of grass that will work similarly in other regions of the country.

“If, in the end, more people and landscapers are using sustainable turf grass, then we’ve achieved part of our mission and can move on to the next project,” Simmons said.

Landscaping and the overall green industry has an annual \$1 billion impact on the Austin-area economy, according to a 2009 Texas A&M University study commissioned by the Texas Nursery and Landscape Commission.

Grass — and keeping it green — has been a big part of that industry.

“Traditionally, there’s always been a lot of grass on Southern commercial and residential developments compared to places like the Northeast, where development is more dense,” said **Jody McDaniel**, branch manager of Greater Texas Landscapes Inc. and chairman of BOMA Austin’s Water Sustainability Task Force.

Habiturf has tremendous market potential, said McDaniel, who saw interest in it after mentioning the grass to a potential customer who wants a nice lawn with less irrigation.

“As we change to more sustainable-type products, areas that want turf but don’t want to use a lot of water will be excited about this new product,” McDaniel said.

And as more local landscape architects explore alternatives to big grass lawns, innovations such as Habiturf could provide significant new marketing opportunities while saving water, said **Brian Ott**, managing principal at TBG Partners Inc., the landscape designer for projects such as Domain II and The Austonian.

About 50 percent of the water consumed in the Austin area is used to water lawns and outdoor plants, according to Austin Water.

“Where before, turf was a big portion of the projects we took on, now, we’re starting to think about how to use crushed granite, or other products that don’t require any water,” said **Brent Baker**, principal and owner at Studio 1619 in Round Rock.

“We better be prepared for some pretty radical change,” Ott said. “I think we are going to have to adapt to a totally different landscape.”