

Tuesday, March 01, 2005

HOME • NEWS • SPORTS • FEATURES • CLASSIFIEDS • ENTERTAINER • SUBSCRIBER SERVICES • CONTACT US
ARCHIVES • SPECIAL REPORTS • JOBS • AUTOS • REAL ESTATE • EXTRAS • WEB CAM • FREEMAIL • WHAT'S NEW?
BRIDES & GROOMS • MT MESSENGER • FREE MISSOULIAN • NEWSPAPER IN EDUCATION



Local News

Two friends hope to hit pay dirt with native soil, plants business

By DARYL GADBOW of the Missoulian



Greg Guscio and Giles Thelen, from left, have found a mission and a business venture in saving plots of native soil from development. Guscio and Thelen, co-owners of Native Yards, will be digging up sod containing native grasses from proposed building sites, like in this area, and selling it to Caras Nursery where it will be available to the public.
TIM THOMPSON/Missoulian

Standing atop a knoll on Missoula's North Hills, Giles Thelen gazes across the rolling prairie and marvels at the diversity of native plants found there.

His excitement isn't so much about what he can see in the drab brown late-winter landscape, dominated by dormant bunchgrass and withered stalks of wildflowers, but about what he knows he will be able to see in the coming months - a succession of showy native blooms.

"There's so much Missoula phlox up here," says Thelen, a plant ecology researcher at the University of Montana. "The only place it grows is on these North Hills above Missoula. This is a primetime grassland. There's a lot of diversity in grasses and forbs. There are at least 15 species in a 4-foot square of earth. You just don't see them all at the same time.

"There's one grass, a native fescue, that can be an 80-year-old plant. It's like an old-growth forest. And there are thousands of 80-year-old grasses up here that are going to be bulldozed. And that's it. That's the end of that plant community."

The area of the North Hills that Thelen was looking at last week is slated for a housing development this year, one of several locations in the foothills around Missoula where the native prairie is disappearing.

Thelen and his friend, Greg Guscio, a wildlife biology graduate student at UM,

Advertisement

- Community**
- Babies
- Brides and Grooms
- Missoula's Choice 2005
- Uncover Missoula
- Church Directory
- Faith
- Bear Necessities
- Student Guide
- NIE
- Agriculture News
- Free E-mail

- Your Health**
- Directory of Healthcare Professionals
- Health Resources
- Fitness Guide
- Hike Bike Run

- Web For You**
- Sign up for eNews
- Therapist Directory
- Payday Loans

Visiting

[Visitor Guide](#)

[Cultural Treasures Guide](#)

[Winter Recreation](#)

[Entertainer](#)

[On Stage](#)

[Grizmania](#)

[Free Visitor Packet](#)

Working

[Western Montana in Business](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Stock Reports](#)

[Work for Us](#)

have decided to do something about it. And they hope to make some money in the process.

Last fall, Thelen and Guscio formed a business called Native Yards. They have located hundreds of acres of native prairie in the Missoula Valley and surrounding hills that are scheduled for housing developments.

The developers were more than happy to oblige their request to take the top 6 to 8 inches of topsoil from the soon-to-be homesites, according to Thelen, since the topsoil is considered a hindrance in leveling the ground for construction and landscaping.

"What we have secured in this half-foot of topsoil are more than just the plants," he says. "You have the native biota, including bacteria, fungi, nematodes - all the required ingredients that have kept these prairies thriving for thousands of years. So it's not just the plants we're saving, but the whole plant community that works together as a functioning unit."

Thelen and Guscio plan to sell the dirt and its treasure of native organic matter as a product called "Native Sod." In the next few weeks, they'll begin harvesting the topsoil and delivering it to Caras Nursery in Missoula, which in turn, will sell it to private homeowners and install it through its landscaping service.

Bill Caras, owner of Caras Nursery, thinks there will be a demand for the product.

"We've seen an increasing demand for more gardens and less traditional yards for the last decade or so," says Caras. "The demand for actual prairie, we'll have to wait and see. The public is not aware of it at this point. But I do know it has a lot of value. Right now we sell a lot of native bunchgrass. This will also have forbs, and flowers and micro-organisms. Native gardens take a lot less maintenance, but not zero maintenance. We do have a segment of people who are real interested in native plants."

Caras Nursery will have Native Yards soil available for retail sale in small, affordable quantities, according to Caras, and its landscape division will install it in larger areas.

"The great thing about a native yard," says Thelen, "is you get a whole suite of different growth and blooms throughout the year. I've become a passionate native gardener. It's taken up all my free time. I used to work out a lot. Now I garden all the time."

Native yards and gardens require less water and maintenance, according to Thelen. Another benefit is providing habitat for a variety of native birds and wildlife.

Thelen says he also envisions a demand for Native Sod from public agencies, which could use it for restoration work on trails and roadsides.

Through his work with native plants and noxious weeds at UM, Thelen became involved with "native plant rescues" coordinated by Marilyn Marler, UM's weed specialist. Marler and a group of volunteers visit planned housing developments and collect the doomed native plants and transplant them at UM's demonstration native prairie at Fort Missoula or in private gardens.

"That was the genesis" of Native Yards, says Thelen. "We can thank Marilyn Marler for where we are now. She started the native plant rescues. She's a rock star."

Thelen and Guscio were helping Marler with a native plant rescue last fall, when the idea for their business was born.

"I said, 'I hate this,' because we know the plants we're leaving behind are going to die," Thelen says. "And Greg said, 'Well, let's do something about it. Let's dig it all up and sell it to somebody.'"

Thelen's research work at UM involves driving around the valley looking for heavy infestations of noxious weeds, like knapweed and leafy spurge, and for native plants that show resistance to those weeds. During his scouting forays, he was able to identify several areas where housing developments were planned, and which would be potential sources of topsoil for Native Yards.

"Everybody we talk to is really excited about this and wants it to succeed," he says. "Even the developers. We thought the biggest hurdle would be talking to the developers. But everybody we've approached says,

4 Seasons Motors

406-728-2510

**CLICK HERE
FOR MORE DETAILS**

'Yeah. This is a great idea.' They've supported us wholeheartedly."

Thelen and Guscio say they plan to avoid soil that has infestations of leafy spurge or Dalmatian toadflax, which are difficult weeds to get rid of, and will harvest soil only in areas with less than 5 percent infestations of weeds such as knapweed and cheat grass.

Even with those precautions, however, some weed seed will inevitably be present in Native Yards' soil, according to Thelen. So the business will provide customers with a pamphlet about weeds, including color pictures, so people can pull out the undesirable plants when they sprout and eliminate them from their gardens.

Thelen and Guscio are excited about their mission to save native prairies in Missoula, but they also hope to make their venture a profitable one. They say they haven't heard of anyone else in the country who's tried a business like theirs.

"We would do it for free," says Guscio. "But if there's a dollar there, we'll take it."

"Knowing this is going to be a house in a year, and that we'll be able to save these plants, gives me goose bumps, knowing we'll be able to make a difference," says Thelen.

More about Native Yards

For more information about Native Yards, visit its Web site at www.nativeyards.com. A partial list of native plants that can be expected to be found in the topsoil the company sells includes the following: Grasses - prairie junegrass, Idaho fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass, needle and thread grass. Forbs - prickly rose, death camas, biscuitroot, prairie smoke, larkspur, lupine, yarrow, yellowbell, buttercup, shooting star, blanket flower/brown-eyed Susan, bitterroot and prairie sage.

Reporter Daryl Gadbow can be reached at 523-5264 or at dgadbow@missoulian.com

Subscribe to the Missoulian today — get 2 weeks free!

 • [E-MAIL STORY](#)  • [PRINT STORY](#)

 • [READERS INTERACTIVE SURVEY](#)

Advertisements



4Seasons Motors
CLICK HERE FOR MORE
DETAILS

Copyright © 2005 Missoulian Tel: (406) 523-5200 a division of [Lee Enterprises](#)

[Go to top of page](#)