GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Naturally Native

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People who have dreams of saving the world put their spin on how they'll get it accomplished, whether with super powers or colorful costumes. Jack Kaskel's vision begins with the restoration of wetlands, prairies, savannas and woodlands of Illinois and Wisconsin. He doesn't need a cape to do the job—just the cooperation of Mother Nature and like-minded neighbors.

Jack and his wife, Maurine, own Red Buffalo Nursery in Hebron, Illinois, a small village six miles from the Wisconsin border. With an entrepreneur for a father, Jack was destined to strike out on his own and leave a computer-programming job behind.

In the early 1990s, he volunteered to restore savannas and prairies in the Chicago area. A stewardship at a grove and marsh conservation area led to graduate work in geology and environmental studies and a volunteer position on a natural areas restoration project. In 2000, Jack started Red Buffalo Nursery—part-time for five years and full-time since 2005.

The name of the business came from a friend who read PrairyErth (A Deep Map): An Epic History of the Tallgrass Prairie Country by William Least Heat-Moon. "Red buffalo" is a Native American term used for prairie fires due to the noise and color.

Jack and Maurine purchased 20 acres on which they have their home and the nursery. They restored 18 acres and use it as a seed source for the nursery. A remnant sedge meadow occupies a portion of the property. There are 5,000 sq. ft. under cover.

Jack says, "We grow grasses, sedges, flowering plants, some shrubs and very few trees; 90% of what we sell we grow from seed." From their property, Jack gets wetland seeds from plants such as the cardinal flower, great blue lobelia, buttonbush, elderberry and bulrush; and prairie seeds from little and big bluestem grass, compass plant and gray-headed coneflower. The surplus seed is sold through Prairie Moon Nursery in Winona, Minnesota. The woodland seeds for Red Buffalo Nursery are supplied by local growers and bare

root stock is purchased from growers in Wisconsin.

The area, for Jack, is broken down by ecosystems rather than by hardiness zones: “fen versus bog; closest to Lake Michigan versus farther inland. We consider the soil and the proximity to the lake more than we talk about zone,” he says.

There are fewer than five employees, but during the growing season they add one more person to the staff. Jack’s wife helps out with sales at the nursery and at farmers markets where they bring 20-25 species out of the 300 they grow. Jack says, “Generally, Maurine helps with guidance when I’m smart enough to ask for it and sometimes when I’m not.”

On the weekends in spring and fall, customers can come unannounced to the nursery; at other times, Jack sees people by appointment. They sell wholesale and retail. Most of the customers, an equal mix of female to male, come from neighboring counties, southeast Wisconsin and Chicago, a 90-minute drive. Jack says, “People make special trips to come here, we’re not on a main road.” He says he sees “a wide gamut of customers: young people with their parents because they’re studying natural areas and restoration, or older people dragging kids with them.”

The nursery has a website and Jack has done general advertising, but feels that it doesn’t entice the people he needs to attract. He advertises through the Wild Ones, a non-profit native landscaping organization of which he is a member. Most advertisement for the nursery comes by word of mouth or by being at a site. Jack says, “When we’re out working at public parks, people see us and ask questions or say ‘come to my house.’ We do like to be out in the public to educate people.”

Two-thirds of the nursery’s business is the restoration of natural areas. “Our business deals more with natural areas and trying to figure out how to take the next step in restoring them,” Jack says. One of his favorite projects for its progression is Ryders Woods in Woodstock, Illinois. “It’s an oak savanna with a lot of buckthorn, honeysuckle and aggressive native species; we cleared it up and it has progressed nicely,” he says.

In a year, Jack has six to 12 restoration projects in parks and on private properties, along with the ongoing maintenance of previous projects. He says of the restoration work—90% is government or non-profit-related.

“The bible in our area is Plants of the Chicago Region by Swink & Wilhelm,” says Jack. A few of his favorite plants are Jacob’s ladder, trillium and trout lily, of which “a colony around a park bench looks like a society of ancient Druids. When I started with restoration in the mid-80s, I enjoyed being out with people and in the sun, but on hikes, there were so many different plants, how would I learn all of them? After 18 months I knew some plants. Now I know 2-3 dozen plants,” he says with a laugh.

“This is a lot more interesting than computer programming,” says Jack. “Sitting at the computer terminal in a big office building, I had little interaction with people and was more isolated than I feel out in the prairie studying or herbiciding invasive species—you notice more isolation in a building full of people.”

Jack’s tips for native growers:

• Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants by Douglas W. Tallamy—“It’s an excellent intro into how native plants support insects and wildlife versus non-natives that do that to a much lesser extent.”

• “When starting to incorporate native plants into your sales stock, use non-hybrid plants or seed from local genotypes: just as ornamental plants do best in a specific zone, native plants do best in a specific environment, Oregon natives thrive in Illinois, and Illinois natives don’t support California wildlife. Start with a varied selection of about a dozen species from a few different basic environments, for the Midwest: prairie, wetland (also known as “rain garden” plants), and deciduous woods. Be sure to include grasses and sedges in every sale; they are the best for keeping annual weeds at bay, for carbon sequestration, and for fuel for prescribed burns.” **GT**

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