

## Harvesting Bluestem at Tanglewood Prairie



By Nancy Dunnahoe

*“Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is the ongoing accumulation of knowledge, practice and belief about relationships between living beings in a specific ecosystem that is acquired by Indigenous People over hundreds or thousands of years through direct contact with the environment, handed down through generations, and used for life-sustaining ways.*

*“This knowledge includes the relationships between people, plants, animals, natural phenomena, landscapes, and timing of events for activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture, and forestry. It encompasses the world view of a people, which includes ecology, spirituality, human and animal relationships, and more.” – National Park Service*

In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, author Robin Wall Kimmerer, a plant ecologist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, urges us to view the natural world and our relationship with land through the lens of gift-giving. To Tribes and Indigenous Peoples, being in relation to the land is acknowledging the interwoven connection between human beings, nature, and community. The Native-held perspective is that plants, animals, and land are not resources to exploit but rather our relatives to take care of, just as they do to sustain us.

Putting this ancient wisdom into practice, a group of volunteers joined Derek Ross, a member of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes (Waco, Tawakoni, and Keechi) on the last weekend in September to harvest little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) at the Tanglewood Prairie in Lee County, Texas. The group also included members from Baylor University’s student chapter of the Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics & Native Americans in Science (SACNAS).

This restored post oak savannah pocket prairie is owned by the Texas Land Conservancy with a conservation easement held by **Native Prairies Association of Texas (NPAT)**. The preserve is situated along U.S. 77 south and might be easy to miss from the highway if not for the abundance of silver-stranded tall grasses waving in the South-Central Texas breeze.

The grass harvest is part of a monumental project to construct the first traditional Wichita/Waco Grass House built in Texas since the Tribe’s removal in August 1859. It will be displayed at the Mayborn Museum Complex at Baylor University, where Ross is the Indigenous Scholar in Residence and Cultural Preservation Board Member, to share the cultural story of the Waco Tribe.

According to Ross, traditional Waco grass homes are made from cedar, willow, and little bluestem. The project began with harvesting cedar poles in Oklahoma for the inner frame, followed by the gathering of little bluestem from NPAT’s conserved prairie.

Our process during the harvest was methodical: cut bunches of tall grass at the root, rake off excess, and bundle for future use in Waco.

Finding my own rhythm of wading through the tall grass as I carried these sacred bundles to the trailer was a kind of meditation—and brought me closer to my own heritage as a descendant of Indigenous ancestors.

Prior to contact in 1541, the Waco Tribe numbered more than 200,000. Today, the Tribe is represented by 3,863 members in Anadarko, Oklahoma, Ross shared.

In addition to little bluestem, visitors to Tanglewood Prairie can observe brownseed paspalum grass, maroon gaillardia, pinweed, lazy-daisy, hog croton, spotted beebalm, mock bishop, soft goldenaster, and camphor goldenaster, among dozens of other grasses and forb species. Within the woodland area of these 31 acres of preserved post oak savanna are Texas black hickory, blackjack oak, American elm and American beautyberry.

At less than 1% remaining, Texas's native prairies are imperiled, crucial ecosystems that help maintain healthy soils, diverse wildlife, and pollinators. As demonstrated during this landmark grass harvest, they are also sacred sites that hold cultural significance for Indigenous knowledge and traditional ecological practices.

Preserving these traditions and learning from the teachings of elders is universally understood to be good medicine, and I'm grateful to the Fayette Prairie Chapter of NPAT, the Texas Land Conservancy, Derek Ross, and SACNAS for the opportunity to participate in this restorative community experience.



***Tanglewood Prairie***



*Left: Traditional grass house at Caddo Mounds State Historic Site. Right: Holding bluestem.*



*Derek Ross demonstrating how to bundle little bluestem.*



*Harvesting little bluestem.*