

GARDENS

Sowing the Wild South

One North Carolina farmer has made it his mission to bring back the wild grasses and flowers that once carpeted the Southern landscape—one seed at a time

by **T. EDWARD NICKENS**

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PHOTO: JOEY SEAWELL

From left: Rattlesnake master ready for harvest; A field of little bluestem grass, once a familiar sight on Southern prairies.

“In the beginning, Daddy would really get on me,” Don Lee says. We’ve moved out of the tall grass now, the Indian grass that reached past his shoulders, to a

field of knee-high mistflower and blue aster where butterflies and bumblebees hover. Lee is tall and lanky, with brownish-green eyes. He speaks in soft, quiet, measured tones and wears his fifty-six years as put together and proper as carefully pressed jeans.

Lee's father, James William Lee, was a "big hat man," he explains. He ran a diversified operation of hogs and cattle and traditional row crops. "At first," Lee says, "he thought I'd stayed out in the sun too long. He really didn't understand what I was thinking. He'd look at a field of partridge pea and say, 'That's ugly. That's not the kind of farming we do.' And I'd tell him: 'Daddy, that's good. Because I don't want to be the kind of farmer we've always been.'"

Lee tells me this as we move through alternating bands of narrow-leaved sunflower, partridge pea, and spotted bee balm. This is a purely indigenous landscape, as native as a covey of bobwhite quail. It is nothing like the tobacco, soybeans, and sweet potatoes his father grew, and his father before him. Except that everything Lee learned from his family's nine generations of farmers has led him to do things differently: bank his family's farm on a journey to grow their future from the past.



PHOTO: JOEY SEAWELL

Don Lee in a field of native grass.

Over the last twenty-five years, Lee and his family have slowly transformed their traditional Eastern North Carolina family farm into a vast, multifaceted seed-growing operation for native wildflowers and the forgotten grassland species of the South. From a single field of oxeye daisies planted in 1991, the Lees now shepherd more than fifty fields of native grasses and Southern wildflowers, and each year Garrett Wildflower Seed Farm ships more than thirty thousand pounds of high-quality seed to customers across the country. There are purpletop and purple love grass and lanceleaf coreopsis. More than five hundred acres of little bluestem and Indian grass and switchgrass. Spiderwort. Three species of goldenrods.

The seeds go to private landowners caught up in a growing passion for restoring native landscapes, and to golf courses that purchase them for course-side plantings and wetland mitigation projects. The farm provides seed to utility companies that are moving to native plantings for rights-of-way. The decline of honeybees across the country has spawned a nationwide effort to plant "pollinator plots" of native species that support bees and butterflies. Garrett seeds are in the mix.

And Lee is increasingly in demand by quail plantations that are embracing a back-to-native movement on hunting properties across the South. In addition to overseeing the farm, he works directly with landowners in large-scale native landscape restoration projects. Lee has helped radically transform one North Carolina quail preserve—George Hi Plantation—with close to two hundred acres of native prairie. Others have taken note. He’s consulted on quail-hunting properties from the South Carolina Lowcountry to the Florida Red Hills to the Mississippi Delta.

And eventually, his daddy came around. “Oh, yes,” Lee says, laughing, “he did. Before he passed, he’d ride around and look at every field. Never ran out of suggestions, though, no, sir.”



PHOTO: JOEY SEAWELL

From left: The gears of a seed cleaner; two handfuls of plains coreopsis seeds; little bluestem.

Drive the back roads of North Carolina’s Johnston and Sampson Counties and the fields of prairie grasses and wildflowers burst into view between long stretches of woodland and swamp forest and soybean fields. “When the fields are in bloom,” Lee says, “people pull off to the side of the road and just ooh and aah over these native plants. They’ll take family pictures, year after year. They’ve never seen anything like it.”

But in at least one respect, these modern grasslands aren’t all that different from the Southern landscape of three hundred years ago. Prior to widespread European settlement, grasslands were an integral part of the South. Wildfires opened up the woodlands, and elk and bison grazed prairies of little bluestem and Indian grass.

Many of those plants have held on across centuries of plowing and logging, land clearing and development. Tiny remnants of grassland prairies and cloistered patches of native flowers remain in old woods and seldom-mowed

pastures. Cleared forests suddenly blossom with prairie plants from seeds that have lain dormant for decades. When one is discovered, the extended Lee family will spring into action. Garrett Wildflower Seed Farm is a family venture, through and through. Lee's sister, Ann Ennis, is the company's horticulturist. His wife, Laura, handles the office. Brother, Doug, runs a large sweet-potato operation and helps cycle his workers into the native plant fields during critical periods of planting and harvest. Lee's sons, Garrett and Hunter, pitch in before and after school. They've all been called to harvest seeds from the state's deep past.

"And none of this is easy," explains Terry Sharpe, a North Carolina wildlife biologist and forester who consults widely on native plant restoration. "Every one of those seeds has a little kink to it that makes it very difficult to work with." Native plant seeds are often tiny—bee balm seeds are as fine as grains of salt. Many have fluffy bristles called awns that allow them to soar on the wind, or tiny hooks that make them clump together. "They're hard to handle and hard to clean, and it takes a wizard to come up with the right herbicides and cultivation methods to grow and harvest them," Sharpe says. "Don is really a genius at unraveling the mysteries that surround each of these native plants."

Sharpe has seen it firsthand. Twenty years ago, while deer hunting in the Uwharrie Mountains in the west-central Piedmont of North Carolina, he discovered a lush field of Indian grass and little bluestem that had sprouted from a timber clear-cut. He brought Lee two grocery bags of hand-picked seeds.

"And that's all he needed," Sharpe recalls. "The next thing I know, he'd turned each little bag into three acres of native fields. A few years later, he had forty acres of each. He's just a guru with native seeds." Today, those two paper bags of hand-collected seeds have provided the foundation stock for what are now thousands of acres of North Carolina Indian grass and little bluestem that have been replanted across the region.

Walking through the Piedmont prairies he's rebuilt from scratch, Lee is visibly moved. "See this flag-like leaf?" he asks, pulling a handful of slender reeds from the ground. "This yellow Indian grass has a very well-behaved upright growth, with a nice horsetail. It looks like neatly combed hair. When I see that, I know that's from the Uwharrie Mountains, right here in North Carolina." All around us, crickets and hoppers are trilling. Indigo buntings whistle. "We've got a plot or two of Indian grass from Alabama and Florida," he says. But he can always recognize his prized Uwharrie plants. "Could be some North Carolina bias," he says, grinning. "Could be."



PHOTO: JOEY SEAWELL

From left: Harvesting rattlesnake master; combines at work on a field of Indian grass; a patch of pink muhly grass.

Lee is a passionate hunter and fusses over a dove field within sight of his home to monitor when the birds are sweeping through the region. We are walking under telephone lines sagging with doves as he points out the native sunflowers and blue asters planted in strips between rows of watermelons his boys tend for their summer job. “Look!” he croons with delight. “*Eryngium*. What us country people call ‘rattlesnake master.’” Doveweed and goldenrod rise to his chest. Butterflies and bees vault with each step. “Exceptional pollinator plants,” he says. “I love it.”

He points to a sweet-potato field across the pond. In the *North Carolina Agricultural Chemicals Manual*, he says, you’ll find page after page of herbicides for sweet potatoes. “But there’s no playbook with the native plants,” he continues. “We go collect stuff in swamps and near old power lines and woods’ edges, and that’s all we have. No rules, no procedures.” And no support system. There’s no crop insurance for native plants, so no floor underneath his business as there is with commodities such as corn and soybeans. “Every piece of it is a puzzle,” Lee says. “I think that’s why I love it.”

His love of doing things differently was bred in early. Much of Lee’s youth was spent watching agriculture decline. He remembers in the early 1970s when sweet-potato fields were so full of decaying vegetables farmers couldn’t sell that his father’s tractor tires spun in the rot. Then he’d walk inside the house, transfixed by images of the horrific Ethiopian famines. “I thought then,” he says, “this isn’t right. The system is broken.” A decade later he witnessed the devastating days of the 1980s farm crisis, when friends and family lost all they had.

By then, Lee was a student at North Carolina State University, and he switched from a two-year basic agriculture program to a four-year engineering degree. After school, he landed a job with the state Department of Transportation and wound up running the division that oversaw mitigation projects for road building and roadside wildflower plantings. All the while, he farmed his Johnston County acres and watched as corporate consolidation in the agricultural industry “turned farmers into servants and janitors,” he says. Pining for a different way forward, Lee planted his first crop of wildflowers in 1991, in the field where his grandfather Garrett Lee had suffered a heart attack and fallen over dead in the tobacco plants.

“I didn’t have a buyer,” he recalls. “We just planted. Laura and I went around to garden centers with our seeds in little bags. They’d let us set up a card table on weekends. That’s how it started. That small.”

Now the farmstead where he grew up is undergoing its own transformation. Demand for native seeds and grasslands restoration continues to grow, and the house where Lee and his brother and sister were raised is slowly being converted into a company office. The metal farrowing barn where he helped birth pigs as a kid now stores hundreds of bins full of seeds. An old flue-curing barn where Lee hung sticks of tobacco as a child now hums and clacks with seed-processing machines.



PHOTO: JOEY SEAWELL

Bags of bulk seeds for cleaning.

In that building, workers pour bins of freshly harvested seeds into the maws of old seed-cleaning machines from the 1950s and 1960s. The older machines, Lee explains, are better suited to modification than modern ones. With their wooden frames and ancient pulleys, he can alter and manipulate the flow of air, the way the trays shake the seeds, and how the hulls are stripped from the seeds.

“Isn’t that amazing?” he exclaims, of this wild idea of creating something new from pieces of the past. He holds a hand under a flume of one machine, from which pours a stream of tiny black seeds.

“Plains coreopsis,” he mutters. The seeds pool in his palm in a tiny ebony pyramid. At the end of a multiphase cleaning process, the product will be better than 99 percent pure. “We don’t want to sell chaff and sticks,” Lee says. “We want to sell seeds.”

He pauses for a moment, the old machines chattering in the background. “It’s taken me a lot of years to finally get it,” he says, laughing. With a thumb he rakes the tiny seeds into a single layer, so he can see how everything is stripped away from the harvest but these kernels that hold the future. That’s been his life’s work. “Everything changed,” he says, “when I realized that Mother Nature is smarter than we are.”



PHOTO: JOEY SEAWELL

Native grasses at George Hi Plantation.

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