

It Has Been a Good Year for Grass

While we are still woefully short on rainfall (at my house, 3 of the last 4 years have seen significantly less than the average rainfall), I would have to say that this has been a good year for native grasses. I wouldn't have said that any time before September, but the rains we received in September and October were not only plentiful, but also very timely.

Most of our native grasses are classified as warm season grasses, meaning they grow most of their foliage and put up seed heads from early June through November. At our house, the first four months of the year were very dry (less than 1 inch total), but we did get a good rain in late May. June, July and August were cooler than average and we did get a little rain in July and August. But then September and October gave us multiple significant rain events that really provided ample soil moisture for the first time in a long time.

The September rains in particular helped relieve the stress that many trees were beginning to display and provided our trees with plenty of fall moisture, but the trees don't actually grow much, if any, in the fall. Grasses, on the other hand, can respond quickly to added moisture and put on significant new growth in September and October as well as put up many healthy seed heads with plentiful seeds for the future. And that is exactly what they did.

Timely rains not only allow for the production of more forage for grazers, but more roots for healthier grass plants and more seeds for the future. Larger grass plants this year make for a greater productivity next year. More numerous healthy native grass plants allow for greater rainwater infiltration into the soil and more seeping down into the water tables and aquifers. But healthy grasslands also greatly reduce the amount of erosion by preventing raindrops from dislodging soil particles and slowing down water flowing across the land. Grass saves our precious soil.

None of this is a new idea. The following is a quotation from John James Ingalls, an author, poet and Senator from Kansas in 1872:

“Grass is the forgiveness of nature—her constant benediction. Fields trampled with battle, saturated with blood, torn with the ruts of cannon, grow green again with grass, and carnage is forgotten....Forests decay, harvests perish, flowers vanish, but grass is immortal. Beleaguered by sudden hosts of winter, it withdraws into the impregnable fortress of its subterranean vitality, and emerges upon the first solicitation of spring. Sown by the winds, by wandering birds, propagated by the subtle horticulture of the elements which are its ministers and servants, it softens the rude outline of the world...It bears no blazonry or bloom to charm the senses with fragrance or splendor, but its

homely hue is more enchanting than the lily or the rose. It yields no fruit in earth or air, and yet should its harvest fail for a single year, famine would depopulate the world.”

The importance of good grass cover on the land is more than just the beauty it provides for the landscape or the forage it provides for the rancher. It is also the health and vitality it maintains in the soil, the prevention of erosion, the conduit it provides for rainwater to soak into the soil and below and thus contribute to the base flow of our creeks and rivers. Good, healthy grasslands are important to us all.

Back in 1947, before Lyndon Johnson went to Washington, he said:

“Saving the water and the soil must start where the first raindrop falls.”

And more recently, my friend David Langford, put it another way:

“Well-managed land is the greatest water-supply-enhancement device on the planet. With adequate and appropriate vegetative cover, land is Mother Nature’s sponge.”

We all have a stake in how the land is managed, even the apartment dweller in the city. And so we all can be thankful in this holiday season for timely rain, not just for our own flower pots or gardens, but for the health of the native grasses on the land and thus the well-being of us all.

Until next time...

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