

## Prairie Nouveau

Cross Creek Ranch's native landscaping attracts buyers.

By: Teresa Burney

Cross Creek Ranch is successfully competing in Houston against a gang of some of the best-selling, master planned communities in the nation by, in part, not mowing the grass.

The **Trendmaker Development** community's sustainable landscaping, which mimics the native coastal prairie by including tall grasses that don't need to be mowed, has helped differentiate Cross Creek from the well-manicured, traditionally landscaped master plans in the area, giving buyers something different to consider in the market.

"[Home shoppers] like that native feel," says Collins Pier, senior project manager for Trendmaker, a subsidiary of Weyerhaeuser Real Estate. "I hear from Realtors, and I hear from buyers that part of the reason they bought here was because of the landscape and the sustainability and the green-forward thinking."



Range Grower Community buildings pay homage to Cross Creek's ranch roots. Credit: Tom Fox

Buyers are also attracted to the community's larger lots and amenities as well, which give an architectural nod to the ranch that was once on the land, says Pier.

Cross Creek, which had its grand opening in April 2009, had 189 sales in its first full year of business. In the first quarter of 2011, it sold 77 homes, 40 in March alone.

Native grasses are only part of the green story at Cross Creek. The community has made all of its common-area landscaping sustainable by planting nearly 20,000 native trees and wildflowers that don't need supplemental irrigation, unlike the thirsty turf grass and non-native plants in other local communities. Only about a third of the common areas must be mowed, and the community uses cleaner-burning, propane-powered mowers to do the job. When Trendmaker bought the 3,300-acre parcel it was flat, almost treeless, farmland bisected

by an eroded ditch. Under the direction of landscape architects SWA Group, the ditch became more akin to a creek with native black willows planted on its banks to naturally stabilize the stream.

"It's a conveyance for our stormwater, but it's also become a huge amenity for the residents," says Pier. A wide pedestrian/bike path runs beside the creek's bank. The process of converting the land back to something closer to native for the area was more expensive and time-consuming than developing the traditional Texas way, says Pier.

Trendmaker also planted nearly 20,000 trees on the land, which had less than 100 on all 3,000 acres when the project began. As those trees grow in, they, too, will help differentiate the community from others in the area. "It's hard to find wooded land," says Pier.

"This was not an easy landscape to achieve," he says. "It's not as simple as laying down turf grass or seeding it. Certain grasses can only be planted at specific times of the year. You have a lot of costs in terms of if you are not in the right window when you are bringing new lots to market."

And it takes longer for the landscape to begin to look finished as well because the grasses and trees need some extra time to grow, unlike turf grass plantings that look finished from the start.

However, "we think, long term, the water conservation is going to be the real benefit," says Pier. "It was really at the heart and the core of our senior management that this was the right thing to do with our environment. And it is at the core of being green and understanding the cost of maintenance and the cost of water."