

# Nature — One Page at a Time



The Schilling family plays a vital role in the company's success.

Agriculture has always played an important role in Wayne Schilling's life. From boyhood, farming provided him with the means to make a living. But, when difficult times arose, Wayne and his family transitioned to a new, relatively unknown form of agriculture. For 31 years, the Schilling family has supported itself by taking agriculture's waste and turning it into wonders.

In the 1970s, Wayne and his wife, Mary, farmed cotton in Hereford, Texas, with Wayne's family. Wayne grew up farming cotton, milo, corn and wheat; and though Mary was new to the business, she was open-minded and supportive. The couple soon started their own family, and for several years, Mother Nature was kind, and farming was successful. Challenges, however, were on the horizon for the Schillings and their new family, and life-altering decisions would have to be made.

Hereford experienced several years of drought, and the Schillings' irrigation system struggled to provide an adequate water supply. Yields were small, and more of Wayne's family members were also farming in the area, so available farmland was scarce. Finally, after several years of minimal profits, Wayne and Mary decided it was time for a change.

## South Plains Compost, Inc.

Using their farming experience and information gained from extensive research and interviews with compost business owners, Wayne and Mary decided to take a chance and start a new agricultural business in the South Plains region. In 1979, they moved their family to Slaton, Texas, to start a small agricultural compost business with Mary's brother, Jeff Keyes.

In June 1979, the trio bought a small portable building to serve as an office and began operations on a leased feedyard. Mary Schilling, co-owner of the company, said the building had two rooms: a main room and a bathroom.

"I think we had two or three desks in there," said Mary Schilling, laughing and smiling. "It was elbow to elbow."

Mary managed the financial books, while Wayne and Jeff created the compost and customer base.

"They pretty much did it all," Mary said.

**"They took old non-usable stuff that no one else wanted and found a way to use it."**

Though the company showed promise, growth was slow, and several obstacles presented themselves. In the late '70s and early '80s, chemical-free compost was still in its infancy, and the company struggled with a lack of awareness about its product and the benefits compost could provide to farmers.

Jay Waller, family friend and agricultural science teacher to all four of the Schilling children, grew up farming cotton in Floyd, Crosby and Dickens counties. He said he remembers the attitude farmers had toward

chemical-free compost during that time period.

"In the early 1980s, organic wasn't a big deal," Waller said. "We

had just started learning that chemicals were harmful."

He complimented the Schilling family on their foresight of the agricultural industry.

"[South Plains Compost] took old non-usable stuff that no one else wanted," Waller said, "and found a way to use it."

South Plains Compost takes raw cattle manure from feedlots, forms it into windrows on the company's production site, allows the manure to aerobically compost at up to 160 degree F for four months, then spreads the finished compost onto a customer's land.

Cattle manure is a natural fertilizer and soil builder. It is made up of natural residues that provide energy and nutrients for plants, without the use of chemicals or synthetic products. Greg Schilling, third child of the Schillings and a sales representative for South Plains Compost, said the company is very diligent in its production process.

"Our compost is constantly monitored," said Greg, pointing to the windrows of steaming compost. "We have technology that alerts us if the temperature of our windrows isn't what it needs to be."

Mary said the company's dedication to quality has helped make the compost a success, and the company has several customers who have continuously used its agricultural products since 1979.

"In the beginning, it was slow," Mary

said as she sat at her desk surrounded by family photographs, "but once people tried our product, the compost pretty much sold itself."





## Back to Nature, Inc

By the early 1980s, South Plains Compost had hopeful footing in the local agricultural industry, and other composting opportunities were beginning to take shape. In 1982, the company began to supply a line of bagged cotton burr composts and blends to the South Plains lawn and garden industry.

The soil conditioner was made up of cotton burrs collected from local cotton gins. Cotton burrs, rich in carbon and protein, contain significant amounts of plant micro and macronutrients. When composted, cotton burrs provide food for beneficial soil organisms that aerate the soil, keep harmful diseases in check, and convert nutrients in the soil to a form plants can use.

The cotton burr compost received positive feedback from consumers, and in 1999, South Plains Compost created Back to Nature, Inc. to better serve the soil conditioner needs of the lawn and garden industry. Today, the company offers seven different types of compost, that range from its traditional cotton burr compost to specialty products for roses and flowers. Back to Nature also offers composted cattle and chicken manure to help fertilize and feed lawn and garden plants.

## A Family Business

Greg said his family always strives to provide the best possible product to its customers, and he is blessed to get to work with his parents, two brothers, sister-in-law, and wife. He said his family is very important to him.

"I had several very rewarding jobs after I graduated from college," Greg said, "but once I had a family, I got to a point where I wanted to find a company that was successful yet flexible with family time. I knew if I came back to work here, I would find that fit but still be challenged to succeed."

Thirty-one years after its inception, South Plains Compost employs 45 full-time workers, owns two related compost companies, and has produced enough compost to cover more than 1,000 square miles of land. Yet, the Schillings remain modest. They will tell everyone that success came with the help of

family members, friends, knowledgeable employees, and the company's bank in Slaton, Texas – Citizens Bank.

"Wayne's family members were some of our first clients," Mary Schilling said. "They've been with us from the beginning. We also have several employees who have

worked with us for more than 20 years. Without them, we wouldn't have a company."

Texas Tech University and its College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR) have also had a major influence on the Schillings and their company. Six members of their immediate family graduated from Texas Tech, and the company has employed more than 100 part-time Texas Tech and South Plains College students since 1979.

Wayne said CASNR has had a significant impact on the company because it has been an important resource for new and upcoming research and technology and potential employees.

"Texas Tech University and the College of Agriculture have been very good to us over the years," Wayne said.

Waller said Wayne and his entrepreneurial skills contributed a lot to the success of South Plains Compost and Back to Nature.

"Wayne won't admit to it, but he is very business-savvy. He saw an opportunity that no one else did and made it work," Waller said. "Everything has a by-product, but Wayne found a way to use them to improve the agricultural industry, and better yet, he's been able to do it with his family."

The Schillings have created a truly successful family business. They have faced the trials that agriculture sometimes offers, yet they remain true to the industry that has provided them with so much. As agriculturists and soil gurus of the South Plains, their hearts beat with the expanding agricultural industry. **T**



Kaci Waller | Ira, Texas

