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Spielman to Keynote Native Plant Workshop

Michael Spielman will be keynote speaker at Keep Sedona Beautiful's 40th annual Native Plant Workshop, to be held on April 6. His presentation is titled "Backyard Homesteading in the High Desert."

Michael Spielman arrived at Verde Valley School (VVS) five years ago when the school was at a crossroads about whether to continue gardening in the science teacher's backyard or seriously take on sustainable desert farming that could feed boarding school students and staff year-round.

When asked how growing food, even organically, fits into a workshop attracting Arizonans who want to learn how to wrangle their landscapes into something low maintenance and, preferably, beautiful, his answer was surprising.

"Where do you want to draw the line? Or when?" His point was reminiscent of efforts to keep only Verde Valley native plants local and eschew Phoenix vegetation. A fellow nature writer once challenged: "Well, how do you keep one seed this side and another that side of the boundary?"

Verde Valley School has been here 71 years. (To get to the April 6 workshop, drive down its namesake Verde Valley School Road and turn left just before reaching the end of the pavement.) Michael's questions continue to surprise. Should VVS grow what was native 71 years ago? Or 100 years? How about 1000 years ago? And 75 million years? So many seeds and plants have been introduced by decades and millennia on our ever-changing planet, everyone can draw a different line.

Though Michael did not have extensive experience in gardening, he'd always had a dream of designing and building a field. The VVS mission of how the school could benefit and serve the community was a serendipitous toolshed. Both saw the garden as a laboratory for the vision and goals of the school.

VVS has an International Baccalaureate (IB) track. It's called IB + dirt. Students get into the field to work as well as to find experiments they would like to conduct, such as learning about ancient medicinal uses of plants and making tinctures. Since students come from around the world to VVS, Michael thought it would be brilliant to grow something each student would recognize as a "native" food plant. The test is: Will it adapt to this environment? It is global gardening international. They've developed Native American tribal connections, Hopi contacts and are excited about their new melons from Africa. Two of the April 6 breakout sessions will delve more deeply into this.

At his Native Plant Workshop session, Michael will touch on native plants as well as agriculture. Currently, as you can learn in other breakouts, increasing pollinators is key. Ultimately the test is: What works? What works in harmony with the current climate, which will be different in 20 years? We all need to find a plant population that will adapt and grow with a changing eco system to carry us to the future.

Their next goal, should you have tools to help, is how to get off the grid in terms of water.

To register for the April 6, 2019 40th annual Native Plant Workshop, please go online to <https://keepsedonabeautiful.org/>. Doors open at 7:45 at which time complementary coffee, tea and savories will be served while attendees bid on silent auction items donated by the community. This event will be held at the Verde Valley School, 3511 Verde Valley School Rd in the Village of Oak Creek.