

Prairie Gardens

when it rains it blooms



Natural Gardener

By Michele Worden

When I think of a prairie I envision a shimmering sea of russet and gold with splashes of purple under a clear blue autumn sky. Of course, there are many types of prairie ecosystems. Examples can be found at the Chicago Botanic Garden, which features six distinct prairie gardens: the Tall Grass or Mesic prairie, an example of prairies which covered most of the middle west; the Bur Oak Savanna, a transition zone between the forests of the Midwest and the Great Plains; the Sand prairie, which was found along the southwest shores of Lake Michigan in Indiana; the Gravel Hill prairie; the Wet prairie; and the Fen prairie.

Home owners can enjoy their own prairie gardens. A prairie garden is typically a full sun garden with 60-80% native grasses interspersed with native wildflowers. Typical grasses include Little and Big Blue-stem (*Andropogon scoparium* and *gerardii*), Switch Grass (*Panicum virgatum*) and Indian Grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*). Typical wildflowers are Meadow Blazing Star (*Liatris*), Prairie Phlox (*Phlox*), Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*), Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias*), and Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea*). The soil is typically a deep rich organic matter but prairies also exist in nature on sandy or gravelly soil. They take some effort to establish but can become low maintenance and are a haven for bird, insect and wildlife.

A prairie garden can be prepared by following the steps:

Evaluate your site. Prairies are renewed by fire; the University of Minnesota Extension office advises placing a prairie garden at least 20 feet from any buildings or combustible materials. Most prairie plants will need good drainage, though you can select those that are adapted to the Wet prairie or Fen prairie. Your site should get at least eight hours of sun a day.

Determine your plant selection. You can start from potted plants or seed. Potted plants will mature in two years but will be much more expensive. Seed is more cost effective but won't be mature for three to five years. Seed mixes and instructions based on region, soil type and objective can be obtained from various websites.

Remove existing vegetation. This can be done by either smothering, tilling or using a herbicide. Smothering can be done by covering the ground for two months with black plastic, then tilling under the dead vegetation. The tilling alone method should be done once every two weeks for an entire growing season. The quickest method is to use a nonselective herbicide such as Roundup and till or slit seed two weeks after application.

Amend the soil. Use organic matter such as compost to help retain moisture and nutrients for seeds or young plants. Soil amendments also prevent seed from washing away in sandy soil.

Apply seed evenly with good seed-to-soil contact. Use a spreader or slit seeder and mix fine seeds with a bulking agent such as sand or sawdust for more even spreading. Use roughly 1/2 lb. of grass seed per 1000 sq. ft. and two ounces of wildflower seed per 1000 sq. ft. Watering after planting is optional but improves germination.

Weed control. This essential to maintain a prairie garden. Hand weeding is the most efficient method in the beginning and in small lots. Mowing at four to eight inches is recommended several times per year in the first few years since weeds grow faster than prairie plants. A mature garden can be mowed once per year in early spring. Where practical, partial burning in April or May is considered the ideal way to maintain large prairies.

Many of America's great prairies have vanished but a prairie garden is an excellent way to help keep an ecosystem alive.

For some excellent reference material and plant and seed sources go to www.outsidepride.com and www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/horticulture/DG6748.html. 🌱

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