



Prairie Planting and Care

Six steps to a creating a beautiful prairie

1) Site Selection

The area to be planted should be sunny and open. Prairie plants require at least a half a day of full sun, although full sun is best. Good air movement is also important, especially where soils tend to be wetter or heavier, such as clays. Low and/or closed-in areas where air tends to stagnate should be avoided to reduce likelihood of disease.

2) Plant Selection

Like all plants, each prairie species is adapted to a certain set of growing conditions. Some will grow only on well-drained sandy or gravelly soils, while others prefer heavy clay. Some require moist soils, while others demand dry growing conditions. A few species can grow in almost any soil, be it dry sand, rich loam, or damp clay. The mix developed and sold by the Scott SWCD was developed with this in mind. The diverse number of species improves the likelihood of success, but you can and should expect some species to do better than others.

3) Site Preparation

You can help get your prairie off to a great start by making sure the seedbed is clear of grass, weeds and any other live vegetation. There are different ways to accomplish this, including passive, mechanical and chemical methods:

Passive: Cover the area to be seeded with clear plastic, or with layers of newspapers covered with leaves or grass clippings, for a full growing season.

Mechanical: Turn over the soil at least three times at two to four week intervals to eliminate weeds. The first tilling can be deep plowing, or rototilling



(6"+) and the following ones should be a shallow disking or rototilling (1-½" - 2½"). If the area to be seeded is currently turfgrass that is relatively free of weeds, you can simply remove the sod using a sod-cutter.

Chemical: Apply a herbicide such as Roundup® or similar glyphosate-based herbicide following label instructions. This should be done when existing vegetation is fully leafed out or the grass is 6" tall. Follow with shallow disking, rototilling, or dethatching (a specially-designed lawnmower blade works well for this) to prepare seed bed. If significant regrowth of weeds occurs, a second application should be made before planting.

4) Seeding Windows

You have the option of seeding in one of two time windows: May 15 - June 30 or after November 1. Planting in July and August is generally not recommended because drought is common during these months. If irrigation is available, planting can

be extended until July 15. Seeds planted in September or October will often not develop a sufficient root system to survive the winter. Seeds planted after November 1 will first germinate the following spring.

5) Seeding Method

Make sure the soil is firm and free of live vegetation before applying the prairie mix. Make sure the seedbed is relatively smooth also. You do not want many voids or depressions in the soil where seeds are likely get buried more than ¼ to ½ deep.

For seeding smaller areas such as butterfly gardens, hand broadcasting is your best option. When hand seeding, you should consider mixing your seed with moist sand at a ratio of 10 parts sand to 1 part seed (by volume). This will make for easy, even distribution and helps condition the seed for germination.

For larger areas up to an acre, your best options will be to use a manual hand seeder. And for areas great than an acre, consider using a pull-type implement, such as a Great Plains seed drill. The Scott SWCD has several manual seeders and a Great Plains drill available for rent on a first-come first-served basis.

After seeding by hand or with manual spreader, make sure you provide good seed-to-soil contact without "burying" the seed. This can be done by lightly raking or dragging the soil surface after broadcasting the seed. Going over the seeded area with a roller or simply stomping on it with your feet will give the seed the soil contact it needs. Light watering may be done every couple of days during dry periods, but is not necessary. Do not over-water.

6) Post-seeding Maintenance

Prairie seeds are slow to germinate (some might take several years) and prairies plants are slow growing especially during the first year or so (some may grow only a few inches their first year). For this reason it is important to keep weed competition in check. This is best down through

periodic mowings or "clippings" during the first couple of years.

First Season: As a rule of thumb, when weeds grow to 12 inches, clip them back to 6 inches. Expect to mow three times in the first year, about once a month in summer (June, July, and August).

DO NOT...

- Wait until weeds are taller than 1', as the mowed material can smother the small prairie seedlings. Taller weeds are also will more likely have produced new seeds.
- Mow when soils or plants are wet.
- Use a lawn mower (they do not mow high enough)
- Be tempted to pull weeds by hand in the first year. The small prairie seedlings are easily disturbed, and are often pulled up along with the weeds.

For smaller sites, string trimmers are an excellent option for keeping weeds mowed back. Remove all clippings to avoid smothering new seedlings. For larger areas, use a tractor-powered flail-type mower if possible. It will shred the weed vegetation and prevent clumping, as often occurs with rotary mowers.

Second Season: Continue clipping to 6" height through mid-summer. Clipping should be discontinued late in the season, however, when biennials are in full flower, but not yet setting seed.

Third to Fifth Season: If it can be done safely, you may want to try burning your prairie after the second year. "Prescribed burning" sets back weeds while helping new prairies plants get established. **Check local ordinances before burning!** An alternative to burning is mowing to a 2" height. For either option, the prairie must be in its dormant stage to prevent damage to warm season plants. If mowed, all excess cut material should be removed.