

PLANTING & SEEDING GUIDE

Prairie once covered the landscape in southern Manitoba. Growing some in your yard gives you a wonderful opportunity to learn about our fascinating prairie first hand. It puts you in touch with our past history and helps preserve these disappearing plants. In addition, many butterflies, birds, bees, beneficial bugs and other creatures are attracted to your garden for nectar, food, and shelter, creating not just a prairie garden but a whole prairie community. Whether your yard is big or small, you can enjoy a beautiful, low maintenance prairie.



PREPARATION

Preparing the soil before planting a prairie is a very important first step. This enables the plants to grow and fill in the space as fast as possible. If the soil is very sandy or heavy clay (very sticky when wet and rock hard when dry), add 8-10 cm (3-4") of organic matter such as peat moss, compost, manure or leaves and work it in. I like to use compost because it adds organic matter plus nutrients and no weed seeds. All types of organic matter improve soil texture by aerating heavy clay soil and increasing water retention in sandy soil, resulting in quicker establishment.

If you are in a new housing development there may be no topsoil at all. There may be only grey subsoil which has no organic matter and few nutrients. Plants grow poorly in subsoil. You need to add 15 cm (6") of mixed topsoil.

Your site should be weed free before planting, the same as if you are starting a lawn, vegetable garden or flower bed. Weeds and existing vegetation can be killed in several ways. You can smother, cultivate or spray or a combination of these methods. Smothering is fine for small areas. Simply cover the site with heavy black plastic or some other heavy material and leave it on for at least one full growing season. Another way is to cover the area with a few layers of newspaper and then add 20-30 cm (8"-12") of topsoil. The newspaper decomposes along with the grass below.

Sod cutters also work well for lawn removal when quack grass is not present, however you may

need to replenish the area with more topsoil or organic matter.

Cultivation works well to eliminate most weeds and to prepare the soil bed. A lawn can be removed by cultivating 3 times, a few weeks apart. Make sure the grass roots are dead before planting. Beware of quack grass in the lawn. It has wider leaf blades than lawn grass. If quack grass is present, spraying with Roundup or smothering works better than cultivation.

Lawns can be sprayed with Roundup when it is very calm. Wait 8-10 days for the lawn to die. If a few spots are missed, spot spray the green patches and wait another 8-10 days. Roundup is broken down by soil bacteria when it comes into contact with the soil. When absorbed by the plant it acts by blocking one essential step in the cells ability to make protein, shutting down the plant's growth and causing a slow death.

No one method ensures the area will be free of weed seeds in the soil. However, one final step in preparation will greatly reduce weeds in a new prairie. Once the site is all ready, allow the weeds to sprout after a good rain or watering. Then kill the weeds while still very small, by tilling 2.5 cm (1 inch) deep. If the weeds come up very thick again, repeat one more time. Very weedy sites may require 2 years of weed control before planting or seeding.

Taking the time to prepare your site is definitely worth the effort. Eliminating as many weeds as possible before planting helps ensure a successful prairie and greatly reduces the weeding required after planting. Your wildflowers and grasses will be off to a flying start and will begin to provide you with many years of enjoyment.

PLANTING

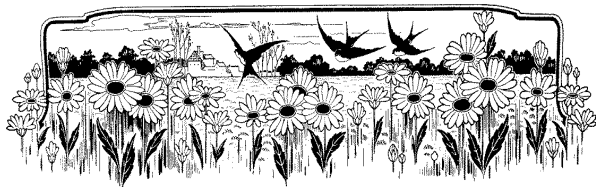
Plugs : Prairies can be started in two ways, either by plugs (transplants) or by seeding. There are several advantages to starting with plugs. The main reason is quicker results. Fast growing species will bloom the first year. Most species will bloom and fill in the second year. Some species, especially those with small seed, can be easier to establish with plugs than by seeding. You can plant directly into dead turf or into cultivated soil. With dead turf use a tool to make holes slightly larger than the plugs. Fill space around the plug with peat moss, compost, or topsoil. The soil is not disturbed by cultivation so many weed seeds in the soil do not germinate. This method is useful on heavy clay sites where it can be difficult to rototill due to excess soil moisture.

Just before planting, apply a layer of weed free, flax straw mulch 2 - 5 cm (1 - 2 inches) deep. This helps prevent weed germination, resulting in much less weeding during the first 2 years of establishment. It also helps retain moisture. Make openings in the mulch when planting the plugs.

Small or medium size wood chips or bark chips can also be used for mulch. A gravel mulch, 2.5 cm (1") deep, is better for species which prefer dry soil.

Spacing of the plugs depends on the species involved. Many species for dry to medium sites tend to be smaller plants and these should be planted 20 cm (8") apart. One tray of 70 plugs will plant 35 square feet at 20 cm spacing. Species for medium to wet soil should be planted 25-30cm (10-12") apart. One tray of 70 plugs then will cover 50-70 square feet.

Plugs can be planted from late May to mid July to give them time to root well before winter. The new planting will require watering once or twice a week for about 6 weeks, if it doesn't rain, until the plants are established. Occasional watering during the rest of summer may be required if long dry spells occur. Late summer and fall planting of plugs is not recommended especially in heavy clay soils. This is because the plants do not have time to root properly before freeze up. Some plants can then be heaved out of the ground as the soil thaws in spring, causing death of the plants. If late summer or fall planting is your only option, it is better to use 4.5" pots since they do not heave out. Fall seeding can also be done.



Seeding : This is an easier method of planting a prairie and is more economical, however it takes a little longer for results. It usually takes 3-5 years to establish a prairie from seed. The best time for seeding is late April to July or October to November before it snows.

For small areas, seeding can be done by hand broadcasting. To ensure even distribution of the seed, mix the seed with some type of filler material such as peat moss, sawdust or vermiculite. Moisten the filler material slightly so the seed will stick to it. Mix the seed evenly into the filler. Use 1 bushel (8 gallons or 36 litres) of filler per 1,000 square feet. Take half of the total mix and slowly scatter it across the whole area to be seeded, trying not to run out before completely covering the site. Then spread the second half of the mix evenly over the same area, walking perpendicular to your first pass.

After seeding, cover lightly by raking, then pack with a lawn roller. Packing provides good seed contact with the soil, which improves germination. Applying 2 or 3 cm (1") of mulch, such as weed free straw, after seeding helps keep the site moist. If conditions are dry after seeding, watering once or

twice a week for 6-8 weeks will give optimum germination and seedling survival. Very sandy soils may need watering more often. Do not over water. Over watering can drown seedlings, especially on heavy clay soil. After 8 weeks, water occasionally if dry spells occur, to stimulate good root growth. Watering the second year will not be necessary unless it is a very dry year.

On heavy clay soils October or November seeding tends to work better. When seeding in late fall, raking and packing are not required. The melting snow and rain will work the seed into the soil. Fall seeding exposes the seed to a cold, moist period called stratification. This improves germination of many wildflower seeds. When seeding in spring some flower seed and most grasses will germinate immediately and other varieties will wait until the following spring.

When seeding a prairie, one must be patient. The plants remain small the first year or two because their energy is mainly going to establishing a deep root system. They seem to be quickly overtaken by annual weeds, so before the weeds get too tall, the area should be mowed at around 10 - 15 cm (4 - 6"). This doesn't hurt the prairie plants and prevents the weeds from going to seed. It allows sunlight and good air circulation for the seedlings and makes the area look tidier. No matter how it looks don't be discouraged. The second year you will be amazed at the difference. More dormant wildflower seeds will germinate and add to the diversity of the prairie. Fast growing species will provide you with long awaited flowers. Gaillardia, Coneflower, Black-Eyed Susan, Yarrow, Goldenrods, and Sunflowers will bloom the second summer. Other species will bloom in the following years.

A combination of plugs and seeding can also be used to plant a prairie. You can seed the prairie grasses in spring or early summer and plant the wildflower plugs right after seeding. Or, an area of plugs can be planted and then in 2-3 years you can collect seed from these mature plants to seed another area.

Plant Selection : Choose the species based on soil conditions and the amount of sunlight your site receives. If you have mostly shade, prairie plants will not grow. A woodland garden is better.

A prairie is naturally made up of grasses and flowers. Grasses provide a green backdrop for the flowers and a lot of textural interest in fall when flowering is finished. They also act as mulch and fill in the space between the flowers to help suppress weeds. 30-60% grasses are suggested. Select at least two types of grasses, one cool season (blooms in June) and one warm season (blooms in July/August), for early and late season cover and interest.

Select a number of different flowers with bloom times throughout the year so you always have something blooming. The larger the area being planted the more varieties you can include.

WEED CONTROL & MAINTENANCE

One of the reasons for planting a prairie is the ease of maintenance in this "Sustainable Landscape". Once established the chores of mowing, watering and fertilizing are almost eliminated.

For a plugged prairie, weeding is necessary several times the first and second year. This takes out the competition and allows the plants to grow faster. It also prevents the weeds from reseeding. Weeding is very important for successful establishment. Once established, the annual weeds disappear and little weeding is required. If perennial weeds appear, they should be pulled, cut off a ground level or very carefully spot sprayed with Roundup to prevent spreading. This should only be done when it is very calm, such as in early morning. As the prairie matures there will be less and less bare soil each year and therefore less chance for weeds to invade. Watering is usually needed the first year. After this, rainfall is fine.

For a seeded prairie, weed control is very important in the first few years. During the first year prairie wildflowers and grasses grow slowly and annual and biennial weeds grow quickly. The easiest way to deal with the weeds is to mow the area with a lawn mower or weed eater. When the weeds reach 20-30 cm (8-12 inches), cut them back to 10-15 cm (4-6 inches). The prairie plants will still be small so they won't be damaged. Mowing the weeds allows the sunlight to reach the smaller prairie seedlings and keeps the weeds from reseeding. One of the most critical steps in the success of your prairie planting is mowing regularly during the first year of establishment. Expect to mow about 3 times the first year, depending on rainfall. Let the vegetation grow taller in fall to protect the young plants over winter and help trap snow for insulation and spring moisture.

In spring of the second year, mow the planting very low (about 2.5 cm or 1 inch) and rake off the cuttings if thick. Spring mowing exposes the soil to the sun. This stimulates germination of prairie seeds that are still dormant, as well as growth of prairie plants that germinated in the first year. If weeds are still around in the second year mow in mid June to a height of about 20 -30 cm (8-12 inches). Hand weeding is not encouraged during the first year or two because prairie seedlings are very small at that time and are easily damaged or pulled up along with the weeds. Mowing or cutting back with a weed eater is a better and easier option.

Annual weeds will usually disappear as the prairie matures and the wildflowers and grasses take over.

For longer term management of the prairie burning or mowing on a regular basis will help ensure its success. It is best to leave the prairie plants standing in fall so they can trap snow over the winter and provide shelter and food for wildlife. After a few growing seasons the new prairie will start to build up thatch. This is simply an accumulation of dead plant material from previous years growth. Before the land was settled, prairie fires were fairly common and this effectively removed the thatch.

Regular spring burning should be started at the beginning of the third growing season. It should generally be done in early to mid spring and can be done every three years or so. Burning removes the dry plant material and exposes the soil. This allows the sun to warm the soil earlier resulting in increased growth, flowering and seed production. If burning is done in mid spring it also helps to set back cool season grasses and weeds which have already started to grow. This favors the warm season prairie plants which are still dormant under the soil. Every precaution should be taken to burn safely. Follow local fire regulations and use caution.

If burning is not possible or you prefer not to burn, spring mowing is a good alternative. It can be done at the same time as burning. Mow very low to the ground, about 2.5 cm (1 inch), and rake off the cut material. This simulates a fire by cutting back last years vegetation and exposing the soil to the sun. It also makes the area look tidier first thing in the spring if you have skeptical neighbours. Many ground nesting birds build their nests in late spring so do not mow too late in the season.

Once established, a prairie is easy to maintain. Planting your own prairie will give you a beautiful, low maintenance, sustainable prairie community as well as the opportunity to learn a lot about our complex and fascinating grassland ecosystem.



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