

Implementation Guide Series

Maintenance of Small-Scale Native Plant Gardens

Inside:

You've enhanced a small, yet highly visible area in your community. Maybe it's an entryway planting, giving visitors that first impression of your community, or maybe it's a butterfly garden along a main street. Maybe you've planted several native prairie plant plugs, or maybe a combination of native groundcover and a few trees or shrubs. Whatever the planting project, good establishment and maintenance practices are critical to the success of the project, and to fulfilling your dreams for the site.



Characteristics of a well-maintained planting site

- All plants are growing well and thriving
- The area is free of weeds and litter
- Community members are supportive of your efforts

Aesthetics are important, particularly in highly visible areas, such as along the main transportation corridor in town or at an entryway. If the site does not look maintained, residents might consider it a “weed patch” and call for it to be re-planted.

Designing for Easier Maintenance

Use live plants rather than seeds. The result is that the planting looks attractive faster, but this type of planting also means a greater amount of hand labor in planting and maintenance when compared to a seeded large-scale planting.

Include grasses and forbs (wildflowers), instead of just forbs. The idea is to occupy all root and shoot space so there’s no room for weeds to invade. Using only wildflowers leaves a niche for invaders. Shorter grasses tend to work better in these type of plantings. Remember, diversity is the key.

Visually define your planting space by including a border. A border is a visual clue that the site is being maintained. This is especially important as the site is new and getting established. You may consider a mowed border, mulched border, or grass border using shorter species such as prairie dropseed.

Keys to Success

Patience and education are key to successfully establishing any prairie planting. Though these elements may not seem like establishment practices, cultural acceptance of a planting, in reality, is a big factor in determining its failure or success. This is particularly true for plantings at highly visible locations - community entryways, for instance. Prairies are a work in progress, and the process can be frustrating and disappointing, especially the first few years. You will no doubt receive some comments from your friends, neighbors, and others in the community about the “weed patch” that they think you have planted, so be prepared by arming yourself with as much prairie education as you can get and by sharing that knowledge with others. Some ways you can educate others include:

- Begin education before planting. Before any plants go in the ground, tout the benefits of using native plants, such as reduced spraying and mowing. Showy prairie pictures can also get people supportive of your efforts early on.

- Post signage at the site, such as *Prairie in Progress*. It’s also very effective to post signs identifying individual prairie species. Prairie posters are available free of charge from the Living Roadway Trust Fund (www.iowalivingroadway.com). Paths through the planting site also will allow visitors to get a closer look at the plants and the signs you install.

- Submit articles and features to your local newspaper. Newspaper articles can help sustain people’s interest in native plants and can be a way for you to celebrate and share successes with the community as the project grows. Articles on interesting facts about prairies, or explaining what maintenance is being done or what species are blooming can be an effective and regular feature in your local paper.

- Map the planting for easier maintenance. Whoever takes on the responsibility of site care following planting should have a site plan. They should know the location of all the plants under their care.

- Encourage many people to be involved in maintenance. This encourages ownership of the planting by a number of community members. Being involved will help them learn to understand the value that native plants provide.



Signage helps promote prairie as desirable and beneficial.

Watering

Prairie plants: Watering frequency in the first few years depends somewhat on site conditions and the types of plants you install. Immediately after planting, water the live plants (plugs and potted plants), and continue daily if the weather is dry. After 2-3 weeks cut back on watering: you've probably gotten through the key establishment period. If it is extremely dry and the plants wilt at any time throughout the growing season, water them again. Otherwise they should be fine on their own.

Trees & shrubs: A general guide is that newly planted trees and shrubs need an inch of rain per week. If your garden-style planting does not receive that much rain — 5-10 gallons of water per tree or shrub per week is what you need to provide. Also, be sure to have a back up plan for summer vacation time. Sites such as schools with new plantings may be vulnerable as fewer people are usually in the area when watering may be needed. Plan ahead and make a schedule before summer break, often the hottest part of the summer.



Mulch helps protect newly planted trees.

Mulching

Growth of trees is improved with three inches of settled mulch. Repeat applications for trees will be needed as organic mulch breaks down or mulch is "lost" by improper mowing. Mulching can also reduce mower damage to tree trunks. Check with your city or local landfill where you can often get mulch in larger quantities and often at lower prices. The benefits of lightly mulching in a

formalized prairie planting include keeping the species individualized, creating boundaries for an identification garden, maintaining moisture and reducing weeds. Mulch can go a long way towards making a prairie planting look properly tended.

Pruning

For trees, maintain one trunk and prune any broken or dead limbs. The best time to prune is while plants are dormant - January or February. Avoid pruning oaks April 1 to July 1, when they have a high risk for oak wilt infection. Reference extension publications with more detailed information on pruning trees and shrubs.

For prairie plants, deadhead live prairie plants to keep them flowering longer or to enable another species that is emerging to be better observed. An occasional thinning may also be needed, as prairie plants have the potential to grow taller than usual when placed in a formal garden setting without intense competition.

Mowing

If your prairie garden is small, it may not be practical to use mowing as a method of weed control. However, you may choose to mow in the spring to eliminate dead plant material in preparation for the new growing season and for public relations. You may also mow around the trees you plant (not too close to the trunk!!) or decide to mow the edges of the garden to give it a border. For larger garden-style plantings, mowing can be a useful tool, particularly if annual weeds seem to be strongly invading your prairie planting. Mowing helps prevent non-desirable annuals such as foxtail and ragweed from going to seed and increasing their populations in subsequent seasons. It can also help residents see that regular maintenance is occurring.



Proper pruning techniques ensure long term tree health and structural soundness.

Weeding

CAREFUL weeding will likely be a key practice in maintaining your prairie planting. Be ready for this task early in the spring, so you're not pulling large weed plants out in the middle of summer, causing a larger than necessary disturbance to the site. Many people are familiar with weed seedlings - ragweed, foxtail, etc. - and can help identify those. It is also a good idea to place markers next to prairie seedlings, so you can more easily identify them since it may be a number of years before they flower. Marking and labeling also locates plants in a mulched environment for watering. Though you have a plan of where things were planted originally, it's easy to be confused the following spring when desired and undesired plants are coming to life. The soil disturbance caused by weeding can lead to more weed seed germination. Careful, early weeding is your best bet at limiting this.

Fertilizing

Fertilizing is not recommended for prairie plants, trees or shrubs. Using fertilizer here encourages weed growth and rank growth of prairie species.

What is normal?

Plants change according to the season and their age. Become familiar with the normal changes of the plants under your care. Regular inspection at close range will help you observe normal changes.

It is common for prairie species to get larger than normal and even become 'rank' in appearance when they are planted in a butterfly garden-type setting. In these gardens, there is less competition than a seeded large-scale planting. Mixed plantings of both grasses and forbs will improve the long-term appearance. In addition, grasses help support forbs for better viewing and provide competition to keep weeds from taking over.

When to call in extra help

- To identify plant pests you find in the garden.
- To assess unusual damage to the plants.
- To identify weed and prairie seedlings so you don't weed out what you've planted.

There are many resource professionals in your area who are willing to help you consider the options for a particular site, including your county conservation board, members of a local Iowa Prairie Network chapter, Iowa State University Extension, the area roadside manager or a Trees Forever Field Coordinator. Contact them at:
www.ecity.net/iaccb/
www.iowaprairienetwork.org
www.extension.iastate.edu
www.treesforever.org



About Trees Forever

Our mission – to plant and care for trees and the environment by empowering people, building community, and promoting stewardship – is fulfilled through cutting-edge programs and innovative practices. Through these, our trained and experienced staff has assisted community leaders and landowners across Iowa and Illinois with thousands of planting projects. Each year, on average, we work with and engage more than 7000 volunteers who give generously of their time and talents. To date, they have helped us plant more than 3 million trees and shrubs throughout Iowa and Illinois.



Implementation Guide Series Involving the Community

Inside:

Your small group of volunteers has a community betterment project in mind, You've thought about it, talked about it, and maybe even have begun charting an action plan on how to achieve your goal. Now it is necessary to communicate your message to the larger community to gain community support. This guide offers some suggestions for how to get your town to rally around your project.

