

NATIVE PRAIRIE PLANTING GUIDE

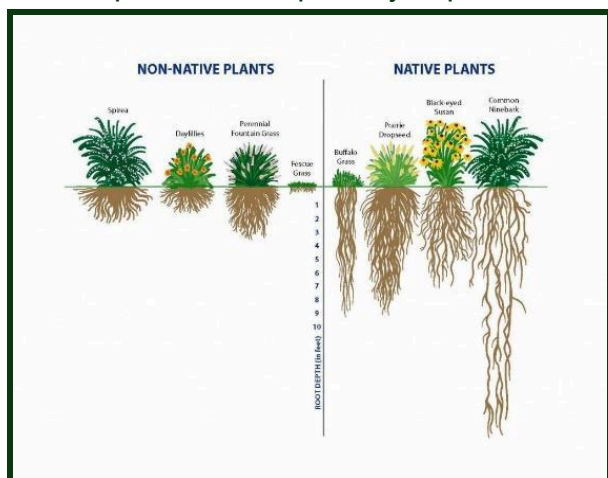


Vincent Yoder

Beyond Lawns

How does native revegetation (lawn conversion) promote healthy habitats and lakes?

Mowed lawns are one of the main features of our landscape in northern Indiana. Beyond their manicured appeal, traditional lawns require a surplus of time, chemicals, and money to maintain, with little more than cushion underfoot as a reward. In small spaces with lots of foot traffic, this is entirely functional. But what about those sections of lawn that just exist to be mowed? Unlike turf grass, native prairie plants have adapted to Indiana's climate for thousands of years. They don't need fertilizers, they tolerate Indiana weather patterns and harmful native insects, they have deep roots that infiltrate water, and they serve as habitats for native wildlife and birds. The deep roots of native plants are especially important for water quality. The more we can slow down



water by infiltration and consequently filtration, we can improve resilience to drought and flooding as well as filter out pollutants before they enter our main water bodies. By thinking beyond your lawn and converting it into native prairie, you can harness your property to its full potential, keep pollutants out of the lakes and streams, AND save money on the bottom line.

Graphic: Clear Choices Clean Water

Questions to consider when selecting your seed mix?

Aesthetic and Function:

Native vegetation does not have to look messy. You can incorporate flowering species, define the edges, and limit the height of the plants to create a more manicured look. Some precise maintenance for the first few years will limit weeds and help with equal germination of plant species. However, wild and natural-looking prairies will be just as functional as precisely manicured ones. It just depends on your goal for the property.



Examples of bordered and manicured plantings:



Both examples show how precision planting and borders create the definition and the look of intentional landscaping.

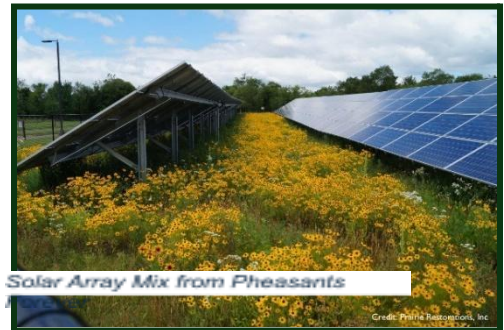
A local example of a natural-looking prairie is at Zimmer Biomet. The company in partnership with TWF, US Fish and Wildlife, the City of Warsaw, and Stantec converted almost 15 acres of mowed grass to native plants in 2023 including a stormwater basin to help reduce run-off.



Height:

Prairie mixes come in all sizes, from under 24 inches to over 10 feet. Whether you want to block an unpleasant view or ensure you still have a sightline to the lake, make sure that you select the height that will work best for you.

The mix on the right from Pheasants Forever does not grow above 36 inches. This is a strategic height that will not obscure the solar panels.



Diversity:

Most mixes come as a blend of forbs (flowers) and grasses. If you are interested in aesthetics, you can select a forb heavy mix with different bloom times throughout the season. You can also purchase seed mixes specifically for monarchs, birds, or game habitats. Our technical assistant or any qualified seed supplier can help guide you to the right mix for your property.



Grass-heavy mix. Photo from Mount Venus Nursery.

Floral focus. Photo from the Kokoro garden.

Site Specific Needs:

Soil Type:

Certain plants thrive in certain soil conditions. Speak with a representative from Kosciusko Soil and Water Conservation District or look up your property report on [Web Soil Survey](#) to determine the soil conditions. Depending on the soil type, you might need to make some amendments before planting or select a mix specifically geared toward your conditions if you have high amounts of clay or sand.



Infiltration:

Does your site retain water in low areas? You may need to consider a mix of water-tolerant plants. Basin mixes, like the one at Zimmer Biomet, will include plants that can handle wet conditions and help pull water down into the soil to prevent run-off.

Sun:

Plants have different sun needs. Most prairie plantings will be in full sun, but if you are planting along a woodland edge, then you will need to consider some shade-tolerant species in that location.

Site Preparation Techniques:

The site prep technique you use will depend on the size of the property and the amount of labor you can put in. For small properties, solarization, soil inversion, and mulching are all feasible. For larger properties herbicide or sod removal with a sod cutter might make more sense.

Solarization: Using the sun's energy to heat the soil and kill vegetation in the area wanted to be converted to prairie; usually by placing a tarp overtop of the planting area.

Soil Inversion: This is also known as deep ploughing where the topsoil is turned over and buried.

Herbicide Application: A process that involves using chemicals to kill the current vegetation to begin prairie seed planting.

Sod Removal: Removing mature grass, or turf, that is in the location of the prairie. This can be done using shovels, a sod cutter, or other tools to remove the grass and a thin layer of dirt underneath.

Sheet Mulching: Involves layering organic materials on top of soil to create a barrier over vegetation and stop growth.



Planting Methods:

Most mixes will do best with dormant seeding, which means planting between November and April. Many native plant seeds need to go through cold stratification to sprout, and this method will naturally provide that.

Broadcasting: Scattering seeds in the prairie area by either mechanical or hand means. Scattering does not need to be designated; the seed can be planted mixed throughout the area.



Native Seed Drilling: This method of seeding involves mechanically pressing seeds into the ground either via a seed drill or by hand to a set depth in set locations.

Transplants Planting with this method requires planting a seed in a pot or container to then plant the start in the prairie. This method is used well for bushes, trees, or certain species of flowers

and would be most effective on a smaller property.

Expectations:

A common term among landscapers and gardeners is that a newly established planting must go through 3 years of growth before it will be fully established and look as intended. Those 3 years are referred to as “Sleep, Creep, Leap”.

Sleep

In the first year, the plant “sleeps” by establishing its roots in the soil. It puts most of its energy into developing a strong root system.

Creep

In the second year, the plant “creeps” by continuing to develop its root system and putting some energy above ground.

Leap

In the third year, the plant “leaps” by taking off and starting to grow more noticeably.

Maintenance:

Mowing for Weed Control: See Iowa resource*

Year 1: Mow more often as weeds will grow much faster than native grasses and wildflowers. Expect to mow 2-3 times from June-July before weeds get knee-high to give the native plants a chance to establish.

Year 2: Mow once early on. Spot mowing may be needed in areas where weed pressure is stronger.

Year 3: Evaluate each year. Spot treatment for invasives or perennial weeds as needed.

Mowing for diversity

Seasonal mowing: Mowing the prairie at different times of the year to support the prairie’s natural growth cycles and promote diversity in the vegetation.

Rotational mowing: Mowing different areas of the prairie planting at different times to promote different levels of growth and diversity. This method is used when wanting to encourage diverse plant growth and reduce the impact of mowing on wildlife.

Grass selective herbicide: Using a chemical herbicide that kills or damages weeds but keeps wanted grasses alive. Avoid in years 1-2 as the planting is established.

Spot spraying: Spraying herbicide on weeds or invasives within the prairie.

Weed removal around the edge of the site: Only participating in removing weeds with one of the mentioned practices around the edge of the planting.

Grazing: Allowing livestock animals within the planting to graze, shorting the prairie, and allowing new growth. *NOTE: rotational grazing should be used to mitigate the plantings being overeaten *

Prescribed fire: Land management tool that mimics natural wildfires to halt growth for some time in prairie and allows new species to sprout. ***NOTE: FIRE-CHIEF AND SPECIALIZED BIOLOGIST MUST BE PRESENT DURING ANY BURNING*** Make sure to follow US Fish and Wildlife guidelines for prescribed burning and get all approvals beforehand.



Irrigation: Especially in the first year or two, supplemental irrigation will be important to help the plants get established.

For more information, please contact program representatives:

Caitlin Yoder; Program Coordinator

coordinator@watershedfoundation.org

574-306-8167

Brad Clayton; Conservationist

brad.clayton4077@gmail.com

574-528-0968