

Resources For Prairie Establishment And Management

By **MARY H. MEYER**

*Assistant Professor, University of Minnesota
Department of Horticultural Science*

With all the interest in native plants these days, you may be thinking of establishing a prairie or native plant area on your golf course, park or grounds. Some things to consider are:

- Most prairies grow best in **full sun** or with minimal root competition from trees and shrubs.

- The tallgrass prairie here in Minnesota prior to European settlement was probably **60-80% grasses**, especially the "big four": little bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*; big bluestem, *Andropogon gerardii*; switch grass, *Panicum virgatum*, and Indian grass, *Sorghastrum nutans*.

- Prairie establishment takes a few years of patience. The first three years weeds predominate while the prairie plants establish roots.

- The larger the area to be planted the more likely you will use only **seed and not plants**. Small plantings can be completed with just plants, which will compete better with weeds and reach maturity sooner but will be much more expensive initially.

- Many people need "new eyes" to see prairie plants for their beauty, thus **elements of care**, such as mowed edges, paths, bird houses, painted or rail fencing and signs can help people accept native plantings. Using attractive flowers placed along the edges also helps.

- What about the cost? Initial establishment costs vary, but seed for prairie grasses is slightly higher than

turf seed, with wildflowers costing much more. The first few years of prairie establishment the labor costs include mowing and weed control, but after establishment, **long term costs are much lower** than traditional turfgrass.

The following resources are available to assist you in deciding which specific plants will work best in your area as well as establishment and management techniques.

1. Plants in Prairie Communities¹ lists plants for three types of tallgrass prairies, **dry, mesic** (medium soils) and **wet**. Included is a large table of 158 grasses, sedges and forbs typical of the tallgrass prairie including such characteristics as competitiveness, flower color, height, habitat preference, period of bloom, etc. Additional references and plant societies in North Central United States are included. This is an ideal reference to use in determining a **plant list** for your specific site.

2. Establishing and Maintaining

a Prairie Garden,² covers how to plant a prairie for small areas, such as a backyard or a few acres. Topics covered include seed versus plants, soil preparation, weed control and prairie management. References and sources of seed and plants for Minnesota are included.

3. Using Native Plants³ is a 2-hour video tape that covers establishment of woodland wildflowers, prairies and lakeshore plantings. On-site visits to Eloise Butler Wildflower garden, Curtis Prairie at University of Wisconsin's Arboretum in Madison, Big Sand Lake in McGregor, Minn. and the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum are featured. A 20-page informational packet with references, sources and plant lists is included with the tape.

¹Minnesota Extension Service Pub. AG-FO-3238-C. R. Robison, D. White, M. Meyer. \$1.50. 18 pp.

²Minnesota Extension Service Pub. FO-6748-C, J. Kyhl, M. Meyer, and V. Krischik, \$1.50. 7 pp.

³Minnesota Extension Service Video. AG-EP-6700 \$50 purchase, \$35 rental. Publications and video are available from the Minnesota Extension Service Distribution Center, 1420 Eckles Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108-6069, 612-624-4900, 1-800-876-8636.

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