

# Prairie Grasses The Vista-Makers

By ARNOLD H. WEBSTER

THERE'S an old way to get a new look for highways, nature trails, recreation areas, and most dramatic of all, hard-to-mow roadsides. In two words, it's Prairie Grasses.

Our pioneer forefathers, newly arriving in the prairie midwest, saw miles of colorful grasses. As rapidly as they could, they plowed up those acres to get the fertile cropland so vitally important to our nation. Now only a few prairie remnants live to tell us mutely how their kind furnished the excellent grazing required by the multitudinous buffalo herds, or how their deep fibrous roots held soil from being blown away by ceaseless winds. Rains capable of moving acre-inches of plowed soil in hours could not erode those rolling prairie grasslands. Indeed, the grasses were a major conservator of moisture, a beneficent soil builder and as we're beginning to realize anew, a feature of magnificent, inspiring beauty.

These remarkable remnants grow on soil so sandy it's not worth an Iowa farmer's time to plow. It holds securely what is descriptively called "blow sand," so called because wind can and does literally blow it away when the protective mantle of grass is opened or removed. The grass roots and roots of myriad flowers (Liatris, Prairie Clover, Gentian, Compassplant, Pentstemon, Spirea, etc.) have held the soil in place against the centuries of relentlessly tugging and whipping winds. Gracefully yielding to the buffeting of their tops while re-

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**Left: Prairie grasses can provide low-maintenance roadside beauty to hard-to-mow slopes as well as the flattest berms.**





## GRASSES (from page 18)

remaining unmoved at their roots, the grasses furnish an ever-changing, ever-enchanting display of rippling green, gold, red, brown and silvery sheen.

The practical worth to you and me is the low-maintenance beauty of these prairie grasses. Imagine miles of roadside that do not need to be mowed, particularly those extremely difficult slopes where mowing is a hazard to life and equipment. Visualize for a moment the miles of spring's green, summer's red-gold, autumn's gold-browns, then recall gratefully those miles weren't mowed. Think, momentarily, how tall grasses rich with seed heads served as protection for song birds or elusive quail and pheasant, then remember that established prairie grasses crowd out the unwanted weeds, as a bonus.

How long does it take the prairie grasses to become established? About three years. The first year, most growth is underground in roots. Above ground are the usual weeds. Second year growth begins to show prairie promise and the third year the wisdom of one's planning and waiting becomes happily evident.

Three years is a long time for our public to be patient, say nothing of waxing increasingly confident. Add to that the people who declare positively they want a short-clipped lawn effect everywhere in road banks and ditches. These are the weak points in prairie grass use along roadsides. However, where people have been able to see the mature unbroken beauty in long expanses of native grasses, they've been awed into open admiration. The best way to win them is to show them.

Suppose a city has some areas temporarily torn up by construction, areas that might be especially difficult or impractical to mow. Prairie grass seeded there will have a good chance to start, and after a couple years' growth, it can be pointed out to the public that this practical bit of loveliness is the same kind of verdure our pioneer forefathers rode, drove and walked through as they moved west in their covered wagons.

Fortunately we always have among us people who are looking forward with vision clear enough that they can see the value of yesterday's good things, too. People like these often think of native grasses as vista-makers in landscaping. Industrial parks, where acres of land serve as backdrop for handsome architecture, are enhanced by the natural, informal and easily maintained cover of grasses.

Borrow pits, usually an unsightly problem, can be given a natural beauty that makes them a distinct asset esthetically and ecologically by seeding with prairie grasses. Few other plantings will survive where rugged grasses will take root and thrive.

Sometimes small tracts of prairie land are condemned for building or construction. This can afford a way to speed up development of land on which a prairie planting is planned. Small squares of prairie sod — taken three or four inches deep — grass, flowers and all, can be transplanted to the new location, thus gaining a year or so in time needed to produce the desired results.

Interested individuals can help as they consider landscaping personal, privately owned areas. A site developer can make admirable use of prairie grasses on slopes difficult to mow but so situated that they form a major background view for several homes in the development. The view of gently rippling, ever-changing native grasses has a relaxing effect on people in every season. This is the recreative effect cities strive for as they plan green belts. It can be achieved — practically — with grasses and prairie flowers.

How does one go about establishing a planting of prairie grasses? Here are some practical pointers from Dr. Paul Christiansen, Cornell College, Mt. Vernon, Iowa:



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Big Blue Stem, one of the many varieties of native grasses, grows well in the sandy soils of the Prairie States.

WEEDS TREES and TURF



Species to use	Pounds of pure live seed per acre
Big Bluestem	2.0
Little Bluestem	1.2
Indian grass	1.0
Side-oats grama	0.8
Switch grass	0.8

He adds: "The seeding rate can be easily doubled to about 60 pure live seeds per square foot if more stand reliability is required. Thirty pure live seeds per square foot is a minimum seeding."

Prepare the ground by fall plowing if feasible, or if ground is torn up by construction, kill spring weeds by disking and harrowing. My own experience indicates that seeding with a Nesbitt drill is a great help, but hand seeding small areas or using a cyclone seeder will work. Drilling (mid-May to mid-June probably best) gets the seeds down in contact with the soil and requires less seed for a satisfactory stand than the other methods mentioned. Roadside seeding can also be done with the usual hydro-seeding equipment. A minimal seeding of twenty-eight live seeds per square foot produced rather amazing results on some poor soil (B horizon) of a roadside borrow-pit planting done under Christiansen's supervision. After three years few weeds were apparent, and the prairie species seemed to have things under control.

Another application of prairie

grasses by Dr. David Lyon and Christiansen at Mt. Vernon, Iowa, is the seeding of a "Nature Park" overlooking a quarry that has been cleverly made into a lake. The "palisade" effect of quarry walls furnishes fascinating texture and remarkably effective isolation from nearby traffic sounds. Trails through the grass reveal delightful surprises as one finds various flowers in bloom. As the trail emerges on the quarry rim, varied peaceful vistas of blue water are opened, altogether a winsome invitation to absorb the beauty of nature in many forms.

A great little book to help you learn more about prairie grasses as a tool for low maintenance beautification is **Prairie Propagation Handbook**, (\$1.25, Boerner Botanical Gardens, 5879 South 92nd Street, Hales Corners, Wisconsin 53130).

Another book, less technical but dramatically beautiful, tells in eloquent prose and full color photos the startling (true) story of prairies and their effect on our lives. This hauntingly persuasive book, **Grass Lands**, is published by Wide Skies Press, Polk, Nebraska 68654. Text is by Jim and Alice Wilson, photos by Steven C. Wilson. They know what they are writing about: they own Wilson Seed Farms at Polk. Incidentally they are a good source of seed of grasses and prairie flowers as well as a great deal of helpful information. They sell the book (\$2.35) but they'll give you enthusiasm.

Considering current oil and related petrochemical shortages, all used for roadside maintenance programs, we'd best give the use of prairie grasses and flowers our best thought. □



Changing seasons also mean changing colors for most species of prairie grass.



Short-clipped brome grass, typical treatment for most roadside maintenance programs.

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