A HOME FOR THE PRAIRIE

Natural landscapes are becoming a practical alternative for the low-maintenance landscape manager.

by Heide Aungst, associate editor

Using chemicals to maintain manicured landscapes has long been accepted in the green industry. Then came the media-incited chemical controversy.

Those who shy away from chemicals look for more natural ways to maintain the landscape. Prairies have become a viable alternative, but they aren't without controversy either.

Prairies are defined as 70 percent grasses, 30 percent flowers, with less than one tree per acre, according to prairie enthusiast Brian Parsons of the Holden Arboretum in Cleveland, Ohio. A bedrock, usually limestone, underlays a prairie.

The biggest complaint is that prairies look like weeds, even though the mix of wildflowers and grasses, naturally crowds out most weeds. The aesthetic value of prairies is enhanced by the various wildflowers which bloom at different times from spring through fall.

The renewed interest in natural landscapes has sparked the formation of the Association for use of Native Vegetation In Landscapes (ANVIL) in Illinois.

Prairie maintenance involves burning the area every few years. This practice keeps down the woody vegetation. "In the old days, lightning naturally ignited fires or Indians set fires to improve hunting," Parsons explains.

Prairie burning is another controversy in the natural landscape movement.

"We in the highway business have some unique problems which makes burning difficult," says Charles Gouveia, roadside development architect with the Illinois Department of Transportation. "Ecologically it's a good idea, but politically it's not always practical."

Still, Gouveia has had success with using prairies along Illinois highways. In 1980, he planted about 30 acres of prairie and "salt grass" along Chicago's Eaton Expressway.

Salt grass is the salt-resistant turf mix of Galway turf-type tall fescue, Fults, Dawson creeping red fescue, buffalograss, Rugby bluegrass, and Delray ryegrass, developed by Northrup King, which will be available in sod form this fall.

A prairie reserve at Chicago Botanical Garden.

Mark Grundman, turf specialist with Northrup King

"We needed things that would live in poor soil and establish a stable community," Gouveia says. "Natives cope with our environment because they've been here for years."

Using prairie has cut mowing from six times a year to twice annually. "Saving money is the name of the game," Gouveia says.

Spraying is no longer needed either. This raises the controversy of how chemical manufacturers will react to natural landscaping.

"I think the chemical companies will probably be upset about the movement," says Mark Grundman, turf specialist with Northrup King Seed, which is researching prairie grasses. "We don't want to get them mad. We just want to try to control weeds and erosion naturally without pumping unnatural materials into the earth."

For this reason prairie is being integrated into landscapes from homes to parks, and even golf courses.

Paul Boizelle, superintendent at Onwentsia Country Club in Lake Forest, Ill., put prairie in his roughs five years ago. Low maintenance and cost savings are the biggest advantages, Boizelle stresses.

Parks can use native grasses, such as buffalograss, which only grows to six inches. The disadvantage of buffalograss is that it greens up late and browns out early. Grundman says this problem is solved by mixing the buffalograss with other turf varieties.

Old School Forest Preserve in Illinois has successfully used a buffalograss mixture for the turf in the picnic areas. During a drought in 1983, the native buffalograss remained green.

Wetlands are the transition area between land and water. The soils are saturated with water, and the water is always in a state of gradual movement.

About 30,000 acres of wetlands are destroyed in the Midwest each year. Such destruction robs wildlife of their homes.

The restoration of wetland areas can solve severe flooding problems by creating a natural area for water to flow through.

Despite the questions raised by the natural landscape movement, ANVIL members are convinced it is a solution to many landscape problems. They will hold a national conference on the subject at Purdue University in June 1987.

For more information on the Association for the use of Native Vegetation In Landscaping, contact: Dr. Ray Freeborg, Dept. of Agronomy, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907; (317) 494-4784. **WT&T**